

If you can't beat them, eat them -

Elder

Gail Harland

The black elder, *Sambucus nigra* is a shrub or small tree with deep green leaves and flat-topped heads of cream flowers. The English summer is traditionally said to begin when the elder blooms and end as the berries ripen. Various ornamental forms have been selected from the wild and in cultivation including 'Aurea' which has golden leaves and 'Thundercloud' with rich reddish-black foliage and deep pink flowers. The cut-leaved elder, *S.nigra* 'Laciniata' has attractive fern-like leaves.

The elder is a hardy and adaptable plant that tolerates a variety of soil types and will grow in sun or shade. This adaptability and the freedom with which wild birds distribute the seed ensures it spreads widely - it is a common weed species in gardens. There is much folklore associated with the elder - some reports say it was planted to keep away witches whilst others say that witches were able to turn themselves into elder trees. Elder has a long history of



medicinal use. The flowers and berries are edible when cooked but are said to be poisonous raw. Do not eat the roots, stalks or leaves of the elder as they contain poisonous glycosides.

The flowers of the elder are regularly made into cordials. Elderflower champagne, a clear sparkling drink is also popular. There are both lightly alcoholic and non-alcoholic versions. The flowers can also be used to flavour desserts such as sorbets and syllabubs. The berries can be used in cordials or to make a rich and full-bodied hedgerow wine. They are ideal for country jams and preserves, pies, cakes and crumbles, usually used with apples and other berries such as blackberries. There is a high proportion of pip to fruit, so jelly recipes in which the pulp is strained through muslin may be better than jams. Remove the berries from the stalks by cutting the whole heads then combing off the individual berries with a fork.

The elder is a common host of the jelly-ear fungus (*Auricularia auricular-judae*). This can look disturbingly ear-like and has a jelly-like feel to it. The scientific name is thought to come from 'Judas's ear' as the elder is one of the trees reputed to be the tree from which Judas hanged himself. 'Judas's ear' became corrupted to Jew's ear but in these more politically correct times the name jelly-ear is preferred. The fungus itself is edible and best simply simmered in butter. *Gail gardens in Suffolk.*