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Growing Older With: Elderberry

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BY TERRY WILLARD, Ph.D



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Elderberries and flowers (*Sambucus nigra*, *S. melanocarpa*) have been revered as an important herb for hundreds of years. It is one of the great folk remedies, and is associated with promoting longevity.

How does it work?

The answer to this question is still quite a mystery, even though there has been a lot of research done on this herb. We know that both the flowers and berries are high in flavonoids (1-3%), volatile oils, phenolic compounds (chlorogenic acid, caffeic acid), vitamin C (36%) and triterpenes (1-2%), all of which have bio-activity. (1-3) The question of responsibility, however, can not be attributed to any one of these chemical groups. This is likely an example of nature making the whole more useful than the sum of the parts.

Elderberries and flowers have traditionally been used as diaphoretics (breaks fever by sweating), and for colds, flu and fever. The berries here also used as a mild laxative and diuretic.

Mild anti-inflammatory action has also been demonstrated by elderberries and flowers. There have also been weak anti-microbial activities attributed to Elder.

Flavonoids, phenolic compounds and triterpenes have antioxidant and anti-microbial qualities, with subtle hormonal-like communication capabilities. It is well known in the literature that these attributes can increase the quality of health.

This subtle herb works as a simple cleanser and antioxidant, stopping problems before they start. This is one of the reasons this herb has become very popular among people who have immune-compromised health issues, such as being HIV positive. Gentle herbs like elderberry can maintain a constant vigilance against opportunistic organisms without harming the body.

But can you really increase the quality and length of life by consuming a gentle cleansing tonic like elderberry?

There are no magic bullets, and of course longevity is dependent on many different factors. But none the less, an elder flower juice or wine has traditionally been used in Europe as a refreshing drink, as a 'spring cure' and as a resistance-enhancing tonic. (4)

As a cosmetic herb, the elder bush is considered to be one of the best. It has been claimed to remove age spots, soothe irritations, remove freckles and

preserve and soften the skin, if applied faithfully both internally and externally. It is used as a wash for eczema, old ulcers and for skin eruptions. (5)

There are numerous old folk recipes for elder flower tonic. The following is found in Weiss' Herbal Medicine:

Take seven large umbels of elder flowers to seven quarts of water, adding three unsprayed lemons cut into slices, with the seed removed. This is



left for 24 hours and then strained through a cloth. To this is added two pounds of sugar and lemon juice to taste. The juice is now ready for consumption. It tastes even better if stored in a cool place in sealed bottles, for three to four weeks. Carbonic acid forms producing a delicious sparkling drink. The juice was sometimes mixed with honey and used as a cough syrup or used straight as a gargle.

Even though we might say that the elderberry and flowers and mild remedies, they are considered official remedies in Britain, Belgium and France, and are listed in the German Commission E.

It should be cautioned that several other species of elder, such as the red elderberry (*Sambucus pubens*, *S. racemose*) can cause nausea and even be toxic in large quantities. The black elder (*S. nigra* and *S. melanocarpa*) has no toxicity and no contraindications.

References

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