

Diggin' in The Dirt: All About the Elderberry

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The OSU Extension office is closed to face-to-face public contact but you can still reach us!

All of us (faculty and staff) will still be working (mostly out of the office), answering phone calls left on our answering machines, email messages (chip.bubl@oregonstate.edu), writing newspaper columns and newsletters, and working to develop programs that can reach you online. We are really committed to helping our communities in any way we can, especially in our areas of subject matter expertise (farming, gardening, forestry, food, food safety, and nutrition, healthy decision-making, and youth education) and any other way we can enrich your life and/or make you safer in these challenging times. Please do not hesitate to contact us! And please, take all steps necessary to ensure that you and your loved ones are safe.

Pressure Gauge Testing: July 1, 2020 to through the last Wednesday in August, Wednesdays from 9am to 1pm, FREE, at the Extension office in St. Helens. Contact for questions and requests for accessibility-related accommodations: by phone and a message option (503) 397-3462 or by email at Jenny.Rudolph@oregonstate.edu.

Pressure canners with a dial gauge need to be tested for accuracy every year before you use them. Canning with a gauge that is off can result in under-processing of home canned foods, which is unsafe. For complete instructions on this opportunity go to: <https://extension.oregonstate.edu/columbia/events/pressure-canner-dial-gauge-testing-service>. COVID restrictions are still in place at our office which is located at 505 N. Columbia River Highway, St. Helens, OR 97051

Here are some free classes:

Free online OSU vegetable gardening class: <https://workspace.oregonstate.edu/course/master-gardener-series-vegetable-gardening>

Free online beginning OSU/Food Bank vegetable gardening class ("Seed to Supper"): <https://www.oregonfoodbank.org/our-work/programs/education/gardening/>

Rats and compost

Rats can be a problem in compost piles when you compost vegetable and fruit wastes along with landscape pruning debris and weeds before they set seed. If the density of fresh fruit and vegetable trimmings is attractive to them, they will spend much time in the pile. Unfortunately, they can also explore your garden itself or your house if they think there is food or shelter to be had.

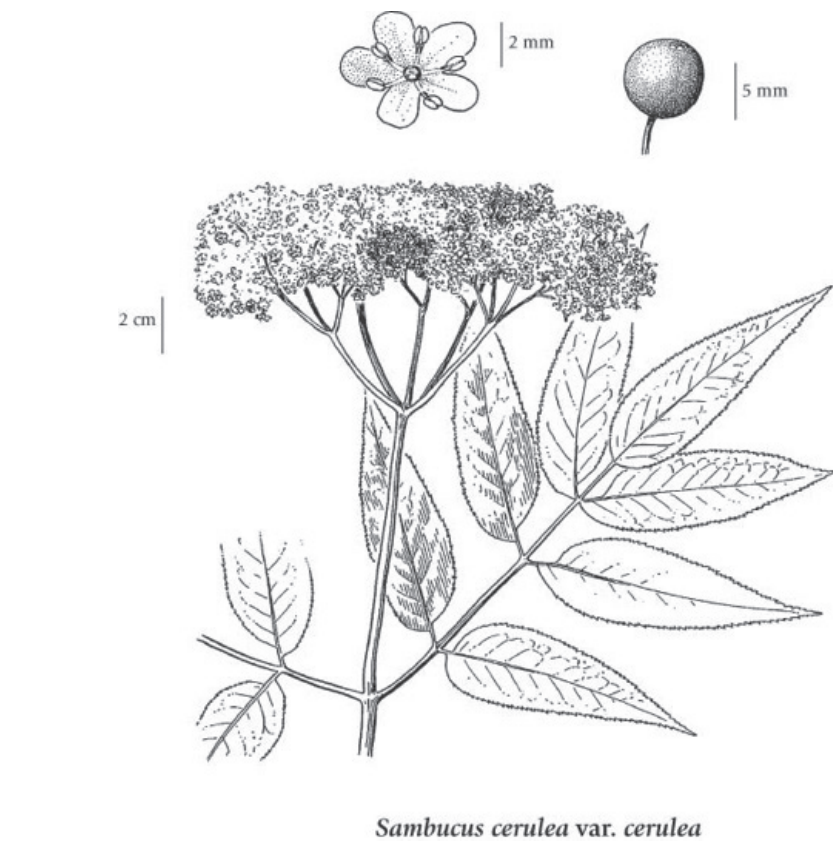
You can reduce your problems by having a tight cover on your compost pile and some screen-like expanded metal underneath. Turning the pile often reduces problems. Some gardeners choose to use worm bins for their food waste and compost their yard waste separately. That is generally a safe (from a rat invasion perspective) procedure. I know at least one gardener that puts their vegetable and fruit waste into a blender every day and makes a "compost smoothie" out of it. The blended liquid is poured into the compost pile, adding both moisture and readily available nutrients for the compost microorganisms but leaving little for the rats to scavenge.



Elderberries – blue and red

Blue elderberries (*Sambucus cerulea*) and red elderberries (*S. racemosa*) are both widely distributed in Columbia County. Blue elderberries prefer sunny, open landscapes on the edge of forests and in pastures or fencerows. They prefer deep soils but can handle shallower sites if there is enough water. Red elderberries are more common in riparian areas and can stand considerably more shade. Both plants are more common at lower elevations. At higher elevations red elderberry is more common.

Elderberries are deciduous small trees or big shrubs, depending on how many stems they have developed,



Sambucus cerulea var. *cerulea*

where they are growing, and how they have been pruned. The red elderberry can get up to 15 feet or more while the blue species is usually 12 feet or less. The twigs of elderberries are fairly large and very pithy. They have opposite, pinnate leaves with the blue elder leaves slightly more elongated than the red ones. Elderberries, as a group, are not long lived (which can be improved by renewal pruning) and are somewhat fragile under a load of wet snow. Both species can develop larger clumps over time if left undisturbed. Individual blue elderberry stems can sometimes develop considerable thickness with one reported to be over two feet in diameter.

Both produce dense clusters of white/creamy flowers in the spring with the blue elderberry floral cluster a flat-topped umbel while the red elderberry develops a more conical floral array. With at least the blue elderberry, there are a mix of perfect flowers (male and female floral parts in the same flower) and separate male and female flowers, all in the same floral head. Here, red elder berries tend to bloom earlier by several weeks than the blue elderberry. If you are in a stand of flowering elderberries, the fragrance can be quite intense.

There is no confusion after flowering. Red elder produces dense masses of bright red berries and the blue elder has a flattened "plate" of blue berries with a white, waxy blush.

Red elderberries are not considered good food although, when cooked (this is important), they are considered harmless. They were an important food for the indigenous populations in Washington and British Columbia but are rarely consumed now. Blue elderberries are commonly made into excellent jams, syrups, and jellies. They need to be cooked and the seeds strained out of the final product. Raw blue elderberries may cause nausea in some people. The leaves, stems, and flowers of both species contain cyanide glycosides and can be fatal if consumed raw. There is a lot of recent interest in the high density and mix of polyphenols in blue and black (European) elderberries. These compounds are thought to improve human disease resistance and improve health generally. That is one of the selling points of

blueberries.

Wood of elder bushes was used for arrows and whistles. Flutes were made out of large green stems cut in the spring and allowed to dry. The pithy center was removed and holes were made in the stem with a hot stick. No flutes were exactly alike and the music was individualized (or so Peattie reports).

Both red and blue elderberries are important feed for birds, especially grouse, flickers, pigeons, and waxwings. Chipmunks eat the berries. Deer and elk eat the foliage (that is a problem in establishment). A wide variety of insects will visit the flowers (personal observations), though I couldn't find any lists of the ones that were the most dependent on these plants. They are good plants to consider including in a pollinator hedge-row.

May you all be safe and have a wonderful garden year. Hope to be able to see you soon. Chip

Free newsletter (what a deal!)

The Oregon State University Extension office in Columbia County publishes a monthly newsletter on gardening and farming topics (called *Country Living*) written/edited by yours truly. All you need to do is ask for it and it will be mailed or emailed to you. Call (503) 397-3462 to be put on the list. Alternatively, you can find it on the web at <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/columbia/> and click on newsletters.

Take excess produce to the food bank, senior centers, or community meals programs. Cash donations to buy food are also greatly appreciated.

The Extension Service offers its programs and materials equally to all people.

Contact information for the Extension office

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