

***Sambucus mexicana*, Blue Elderberry**

General Botanical Characteristics

Blue elderberry is a short-lived, shade intolerant (or slightly tolerant) shrub or small tree, usually between 6.5 feet to 13 feet tall, but sometimes reaching 20 feet. Young twigs are soft and pithy but the wood is quite hard with grayish bark or thin, dark brown, irregularly furrowed and ridged bark. There may be a thick taproot with fibrous, spreading, lateral roots. The leaves are opposite and odd-pinnate with five to nine serrate leaflets. The flowers are white or cream colored. The fruit is edible (caution should be used before eating the fruit because poisonous varieties look similar) and blue-black with a gracious bloom that makes it appear to be powder blue.



Seasonal Development

In California Blue Elderberry blooms from June to September with fruiting in September. In Utah blooms occurs in July and August with fruiting from August to October.

Distribution/Habitat

Blue elderberry's range in western North America is from southern British Columbia and western Alberta to California, Arizona, and New Mexico. It extends east into western Montana, western Colorado, and Trans-Pecos Texas and south into northwest Mexico. Blue elderberry usually occurs in openings in moist forest habitats and in moist areas within drier, more open habitats. It is part of the riparian communities of the Central Valley of California and it is frequently associated with alder and quaking aspen communities.

Interesting Facts

- The fruit of blue elderberry is frequently gathered for wine, jellies, candy, pies, and sauces and it is cultivated commercially in Oregon.
- Native Americans gathered the fruit to cook, dry, or to eat raw. They used a liquid made from the flowers and leaves for medicinal purposes.
- In the spring the young sprouts can be cooked and eaten. Caution should be used in eating elderberries since other species in the genus contain a cyanogenetic glycoside and an alkaloid that can cause nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and gastrointestinal pain.

References

Forest Service Fire Effects Plant Database, November 2002, <http://www.fs.fed.us/database/feis/plants/shrub/samcer/index.html>.

Photo from CalFlora Database, November 2002, <http://www.calflora.org>.