

PICKING AND USING ELDERBERRIES

- PICK ELDERBERRIES BY CUTTING ENTIRE LARGE CLUSTERS (take pruners with you!) Elderberries don't keep especially well, so refrigerate the clusters and leave the berries on the stems until you're ready to use them.
- ELDERBERRY SPECIES ARE BETTER KNOWN FOR THEIR ANTI-VIRAL PROPERTIES than for their rather minimal taste! Modern research has focused mainly on the European species, but Native Americans reportedly used our local elderberries for the same purpose, and my own experience suggests they really do work. (I had more or less abandoned the Kestrel Perch elderberries, which got lost in a jungle of weeds the year they were planted, until a big run on them in the swine flu season of 2009 encouraged me to "find" them again!) Freezing the berries (either loose or mashed in ice cube trays) is a good way to keep individual portions around for cold and flu season – just make a tea/juice by pouring boiling water (or, for a stomach virus, hot ginger tea) over a tablespoon or two.
- THE ENTIRE ELDERBERRY PLANT IS TOXIC, with the exception of the flowers and ripe fruits. In quantity, even raw ripe fruits can cause nausea in susceptible individuals, so the berries are best used cooked. (Pouring boiling water over them, as above, seems to be enough "cooking.") And make sure to remove as much stem material as possible before you freeze or cook elderberries. A fork can help in stripping the berries off the stems, but frankly it's tedious any way you do it!
- ELDERBERRIES HAVE LITTLE OF THE SWEETNESS AND ACIDITY we usually associate with fruits, so they need sweetener and lemon juice added to bring out their distinctive flavor. With those additions, they make a very tasty jam (you'll need to use commercial pectin). They're quite seedy, so you may want to cook and strain berries destined for jam. When cooked in combination with non-seedy fruits (e.g., as an addition to applesauce), elderberries add a nice flavor variation and the seediness isn't unpleasant – a bit like eating figs!