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Common Elderberry, Black Elderberry *Sambucus canadensis* L.

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Technical Report



Wetland Flora

No. 95-3 / March 1995

Gene Silberhorn

Common Elderberry Black Elderberry

Sambucus canadensis L.

Growth Habit and Diagnostic Characteristics

Elderberry, commonly found in wet areas, is a shrub with limber branches; opposite, pinnately compound leaves and black berry-like fruits called drupes. Each compound leaf may have 5 to 11 (usually 5-7) leaflets or pinna. Leaflet margins are serrated (finely toothed). *Sambucus canadensis* and the red elderberry, *S. pubens*, are the only fleshy fruit bearing shrubs with opposite, pinnately compound leaves in temperate Eastern North America. Red elderberry is mainly an Appalachian shrub with bright red fruits. Black elderberry has purple-black fruits and is distributed throughout Virginia. The drupes, slightly larger than BB shot (up to 6mm), are produced in dense profusion in dome-like or flat topped clusters (cymes) in August/September. A multitude of minute white flowers develop in May/June in flat-topped cymes that somewhat resemble the flowering head of the herb, queen anne's lace (*Daucus carota*).

When heavily laden with fruit, the weak branches often droop. The internal central portion of the branches have solid white pith and the thin bark is peppered with wart-like lenticels, which are distinguishing winter characteristics. Black elderberry fruit is edible and can be used in making delectable preserves or jellies, especially when combined with currants.

Distribution

Sambucus canadensis is found in wet areas throughout the eastern half of North America.

Habitat

Black elderberry is found in a wide variety of nontidal wetland types. It is perhaps noticed most often along roadside ditches. *Sambucus* is also a common shrub in palustrine forested wetlands. Associated shrubs in this habitat are highbush blueberry, *Vaccinium corymbosum*; swamp dogwood, *Cornus amomum*; sweet pepperbush, *Clethra alnifolia*; paw paw, *Asimina triloba* (Wetland Flora, No. 93-12 / November 1993); button bush, *Cephalanthus occidentalis* (Wetlands Flora, No. 94 -10 / November 1994) and spice bush, *Lindera benzoin* (Wetland Flora, No. 94-5 / July 1994).

Ecological Values / Benefits

Elderberries are an abundant food source for song-birds. Bluebirds, catbirds, kingbirds and thrashers are known to feed on the fleshy fruits. In combination with fleshy fruited shrubs such as blueberries, dogwoods, and spice bush, wetland shrubs offer a variety of food choices and cover for both birds and small mammals.

Hydrophytic Factor / Wetland Indicator Status

As listed in the *National List of Plant Species that Occur in Wetlands: Virginia 1988*, *Sambucus canadensis* is classified as a **facultative wetland plant (FACW)**. FACW plants "usually occur in wetlands (estimated probability 67%- 99%)."

Sambucus canadensis L.



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