



ELDERBERRY *Sambucus simpsonii*

# NATIVE WILD FOODS: The Elderberry

(*Sambucus canadensis* or, synonymously, *S. simpsonii*)

By its Latin name, you can tell that elderberry ranges far and wide, north to Canada and west to Louisiana. The northern elderberry loses its leaves in winter, while *S. simpsonii* is evergreen, blooming and bearing fruit almost year-round. It likes dampness, growing along canals, roadside swales, and lake edges.

It is easy to recognize, growing to ten feet high, with compound leaves, 5" lacy clusters of small, white blossoms in an umbrella shape, and umbrellas of small, black berries. In Florida, you can often find blossoms, green berries, and ripe black berries on the same bush at the same time.

Both blossoms and berries provide wild-food delectables. Dick suggests picking the full head of blossoms, dipping them in batter, and frying them in deep fat. Eat them right off the stem. Or pull the blossoms off the stems and mix them in the batter before you cook them as pancakes. If you smell the delicate odor of the blossoms, you'll get an idea of the flavor that will be added to your breakfast pancakes.

Dick served a hot tea made from dried elder blossoms at the last Tarflower Chapter meeting I attended. Pick and shake the blossoms off the stems (be sure all the stems are removed because they add a rankness to the flavor) onto a cookie sheet, leave in the oven with pilot light or oven light on (but no other heat) until thoroughly dry (couple of days). Store in a closed bottle in the dark, and steep as you would any tea. Dick says tea can be made from fresh blossoms, too.

The prettiest and tastiest syrup and jelly you ever had can be made from the ripe berries. Pick a grocery bag-full of bunches of the black berries, rinse the dust off, strip the berries off the stems, and boil gently in a little water, mashing the berries as they soften. Strain through a cloth as you would any jelly. Add sugar equal to the



amount of juice and — to make syrup — boil until the sugar is dissolved. To make jelly, add a package of commercial pectin such as Sure-Jell to the juice and sugar, and follow directions on the package. (The directions will call for lemon or apple juice to add some tartness. Dick prefers it "straight", though it has to be cooked a little longer to jell.)

You've heard of elderberry pie? Make it from fresh, frozen, or reconstituted dried berries, add an equal amount of sugar, then add a tablespoon or two of both corn starch and water. Pour the mixture into a pie shell, cook, and eat.

Dick suggests this idea for more elderberry goodies: Buy refrigerator croissant rolls, flatten them into long shapes on a cookie tin, and turn up the edges (to hold in the juice). Spread on the elderberry pie mixture, and bake until golden brown and bubbly. Dick says no samples of this recipe have ever come back home from a Tarflower chapter meeting!

If you're into this hobby for the long term, try brewing some elderberry wine from the berries, or champagne from the blossoms.

Dick says wild foods has been a fascinating hobby. He'll share some more with you in the next issue of *The Palmetto*.