Elderberries have a variety of uses

Native to Oklahoma and other parts of North America, elderberry is a lesser-known crop harvested from the wild. Elderberries have a variety of uses, including making jams, jellies, pies, juice and wine. Not only are they tasty, they also have potential health benefits such as high levels of vitamin C, iron and antioxidants. Elderberries also make great landscape plants and are an excellent choice for the edible landscape.

Elderberry cultivars may be hard to find due to limited demand. Fortunately, elderberries are easy to propagate from cuttings or by layering.

When growing elderberries, be sure to get a soil test before planting. Soils high in organic matter are ideal. If the soil test indicates phosphorous and potassium need to be added to the soil, this one-time addition should be sufficient and not needed again. The site for planting should be shady with good air circulation around the plants to reduce leaf and disease issues. Choose a site that drains well to help avoid root rot. Planting on raised berms can help in areas where drainage is an issue.

Before planting, remove any damaged or broken parts of the plant and cut back the top portion, leaving 8 to 10 inches. Set the dormant plants with the lowest branches at or just below the soil line and water thoroughly to settle the soil around the roots. Be sure to water weekly if rainfall isn’t sufficient, which is a good possibility in Oklahoma.

Because elderberries are only partially self-fruitful, two or more cultivars should be planted near each other to provide for cross-pollination. Gardeners who propagated plants by taking cuttings from native plants need to be sure to select cuttings from several areas to ensure variability.

Elderberries likely will need a yearly application of nitrogen for good growth. Young plants need about 1 to 2 tablespoons of fertilizers such as ammonium sulfate, ammonium nitrate or urea annually in the spring. If the plants are older and more established, gardeners will need to apply 3 or 4 tablespoons of the same fertilizers. Nitrogen can also be supplied by compost or manures. How do you know if fertilizer is needed? If the plant is producing a lot of new growth and is vigorous, reduce the amount of fertilizer. However, if plant growth is moderate but still appears thrifty, apply the recommended amount. Finally, increase nitrogen application by half if few new canes are produced and growth seems poor.

Weed management is important with elderberries as they aren’t competitive with weeds. Control perennial weeds before planting. Also, grasses can be especially troublesome. To help combat weed growth, apply about 4 inches of mulch around the base of the plants. There are several options for mulch, including bark, bark chips, wood chips, sawdust and straw. Be careful of
mulching too deep because rodents may find it a suitable habitat. Grasses can be left between rows to give gardeners a place to walk when harvesting.

Elderberries are susceptible to a variety of diseases, including tomato ringspot virus, fungal cankers and powdery mildew. Be aware of insect pests such as aphids, cecropia moth and the elder shoot borer. These pests feed on the foliage and can bore holes into the stems and shoots.

Don’t expect a big harvest the first year. As time goes on, production on mature plants can range from 12 to 15 pounds per plant. Harvest typically occurs mid-August to mid-September. Keep in mind the roots, stems, leaves and unripe fruit are somewhat toxic and shouldn’t be consumed.

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