Elderberries

General Information

- Widest range of all small fruits; northern Quebec, Canada to South America.
- Native to Eastern North America
- European elderberry is sambucus nigra
- American elderberry is sambucus canadensis
- Height can be as much as 10 feet in northern regions to 15 feet in southern
- European elderberry can live 25 years. It is believed American is similar.

Planting

- Elderberry prefers a heavy soil high in organic material.
- Soil pH should be 5.5 and 7.5
- Elderberry can be grown from seeds, cuttings, suckers or rhizomes.
- Most new plantings are established with root cuttings and will have a crop the second year.
- Plantings establish by seed will take 3-4 years to produce a crop.
- Root cuttings should be taken when the plant is dormant.
- Cuttings should be 6-8 inches and contain three to five buds each.
- Cuttings should be placed in growing media in late January or February to be ready to plant in spring.
- New roots will appear on cuttings within two weeks. Cuttings should be grown in the green house 6-8 weeks before field planting.
- Cuttings should be set 4 to 5 feet apart with rows 10-12 feet apart to allow equipment to move between the rows.
- Plantings can be done from early spring through June, but late plantings will have little first year growth.
- Does best with ample moisture and thrive even under poor drainage. Will grow in swamps, bogs and does well in transition zones between wetlands and upland.
- Will tolerate short periods of flooding, but not long periods.
- Production will be maximized in plantings with full sun.
- Rooted cuttings should be planted slightly below the collar and the soil tamped.
- Planting during dormant periods is best.
- New elderberry plantings need good weed control as they do not compete well.
- New plantings need .6 to one inch of water per week

Growing

- Elderberries are among the first plants to leaf out in the spring, as early as late February in Missouri.
- Late spring frost rarely affects elderberry production.
- A single cultivar with give adequate pollination for good production
- Pollination usually occurs through wind, insects play a minor roll in pollination.
- Fruiting mainly occurs on the terminal portion of one and two year-one canes.
- In Missouri, full flowering occurs in mid-June.
- Berries ripen from green to red to black with a hint of purple.
- Berries ripen over a period of 6-8 weeks.
- Berry size is 3/16 to ¼ inch.
- Water requirements are one inch per week during the growing season and more during drought and fruit ripening.
- Elderberry plants are shallow rooted, thus, moisture and nutrients are received in the top few inches of soil.

Fertilizing

- Use 10-10-10, apply 4oz per age of the plant, not to exceed one pound per plant.
- Apply fertilize in the early spring at about leaf out, late February.
- Additional N, up to one pound of ammonium nitrate per plant, can be applied in late May to early June.

Pruning

- There are three recommended pruning methods: 1) selectively remove dead and undesirable canes each year; 2) remove all canes near ground level every other year; 3) remove all canes annually near ground level when the plant is dormant.
- Removing all canes spurs vigorous new growth and results in a shorter window for fruit ripening. Canes produce fewer, but very large clusters
- Selective pruning results in a longer period of harvest and many small clusters
- Production will increase rapidly the first three years
- Browsing by deer can decrease production significantly.
- Birds and small animals are attracted to the elderberry fruit

Harvesting

- The entire cluster is cut off at harvest.
- Berries should be processed shortly after harvest to preserve quality
- Stems should be removed; this can be done before or after berries are frozen
- Berries then go through a press to remove the juice.