



Alabama's *TREASURED Forests*
513 Madison Avenue
P.O. Box 302550
Montgomery, Alabama 36130-2550
CHANGE SERVICE REQUESTED

PRESORTED
STANDARD
U.S. POSTAGE PAID
MONTGOMERY AL
PERMIT NO 109

OF ALABAMA Plants

American Elder

(*Sambucus nigra* ssp. *Canadensis*)

By Fred Nation, Environmental Services, Baldwin County

American elder is a large, irregular native shrub to about 15 feet tall, which occurs throughout the eastern United States. In Alabama it can be found scattered throughout the state, mostly in moist, disturbed areas. The common name has several variants including elder, elderberry, and American black elderberry. In older references the scientific name is given as *Sambucus canadensis*.

The leaves are opposite on the stem, odd-pinnately compound, about one foot long, with 5 to 11 serrate, lanceolate leaflets. When crushed, elder leaves have a disagreeable odor. The flowers are small, creamy white, with five petals, in large, flat clusters, mostly in late spring through midsummer. The fruits are dark purple drupes, about one-quarter inch across, ripening from midsummer into fall.

Sambucus leaves, branches, roots, and seeds all contain toxins. Any of these plant parts, as well as the sap, can cause cyanide poisoning if ingested. Additionally, the unripe berries and flowers contain a poisonous alkaloid which makes them toxic as well. Despite these dangers, the ripe fruits are often made into jelly, preserves, and wine.

Worldwide, the 20 or so *Sambucus* species are surrounded by many myths and legends. In medieval Europe, elder leaves and branches were believed to repel bad luck and evil influence. It is probably no accident that the most powerful

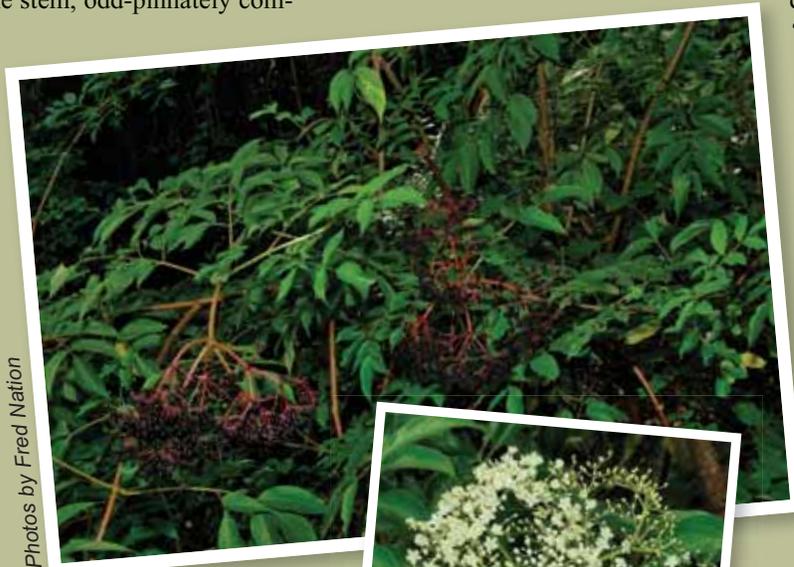
magic wand of Harry Potter, the popular literary character, is the "Elder Wand."

Pith is a soft, spongy substance that is found in the centers of the stems of dicot vascular plants. In American elder, the pith is soft and relatively quite large. Generations of children have used a sharp stick to remove the pith from elder branches to make popguns, blowguns, and whistles. *Sambucus*, the genus name,

comes from the Greek "sambuce," an ancient musical instrument similar to a flute.

Possibly because of its toxic chemistry, elder foliage is not widely foraged, but the ripe fruits are valuable food resources for foxes, raccoons, and a variety of birds including blue jays, thrushes, grosbeaks, and the occasional woodpecker. Their dense, irregular habits make elders good nesting shrubs for birds.

Several named varieties are available, and their masses of white flowers can be a nice native landscape addition to moist, open sites such as stream and pond banks. ♣



Photos by Fred Nation

