

THE WILD ELDERBERRY

HARVESTING AUGUST/SEPTEMBER FOR THE
NOVEMBER WILD&SLOW



THE JUST-ABOUT COMPLETE, BEGINNERS GUIDE ON
WHERE TO FIND IT, WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE,
HOW TO PICK IT, HOW TO PREPARE IT,
AND HOW TO PRESERVE IT UNTIL NOVEMBER WITH
SUGGESTED RECIPES FOR ANY STALLHOLDER WISHING
TO PARTAKE IN WILD&SLOW



THE WILD ELDER

Elder is one of a number of indigenous, all shrub-like, trees that became common about six thousand years ago following forest clearance by the first farmers on the island. In ancient Ireland trees were accorded magic qualities and were symbols of the agricultural year. White blossom was a sign of spring and the purplish black berries a sign of fulfillment of the harvest and renewed life. (1) In old Irish Brehon law texts Trom (the Elder) is in the list of third class trees. As the wood itself has no practical use, its classification probably was because it was prized for its aromatic blossoms and juicy berries. (2)



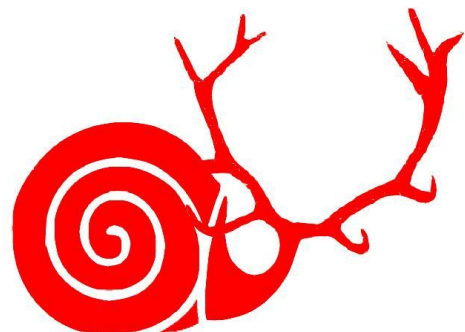
Where to find Wild Elder

Elder is a common tree all over Europe. In Ireland you'll find it in hedgerows, beside footpaths, in neglected and recently cleared woodland, parks and gardens.

What it looks like



Elder is an untidy, many stemmed, shrub tree rarely more than 5 metres high; the bark is corky and grey-white in colour; it has 5-7 elliptical, finely toothed, soft, green leaves. In spring it has bracts of white blossom. In late summer these turn into reddish clusters of small berries which as they ripen turn purple/black and, depending on aspect and altitude, are normally ready for picking in September. A good sign that the berries are ripe enough is the bracts carrying the clusters of berries turn upside down.





How to pick

Bring with you a large basket or plastic bucket and a walking stick with a curved handle; a crutch also works well, so does a shepherd's crook. Anything that will draw the branches close enough to cut the berry cluster off, or nip it off with your nails. Choose a place well away from traffic fumes and busy roads; look for trees with plenty of very dark red/purple black fully ripe berries and avoid those that have begun to wrinkle. . A good sign that the berries are ripe enough is the bracts carrying the clusters of berries turn upside down.

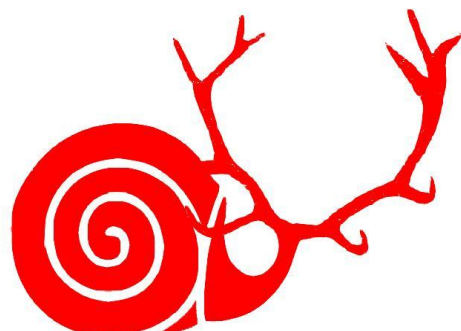
How to prepare

Give them a quick shake to discard stray leaves and the odd insect. Many experts advise a quick rinse with water. However, you may choose not to do this if the berries are intended for wine, as you may wash off the natural yeasts. Strip the berries from the stalks with a fork. The juice does stain the skin so you may wish to wear rubber gloves.

Traditional uses

Traditionally wild elderberries were eaten fresh, or preserved by drying, preserved with sugar, made into wine or chutney, bottled sauces, used to flavor vinegar and a variety of drinks and syrups as well as desserts, cakes and biscuits. In a good year they make good wine or can be used to flavour spirits. They were made into cordials and syrups, jams and jellies (often with crab apples or other hedgerow berries). There are many references to pontack sauce - a spicy sauce made with vinegar or red wine and often used to add flavour to organ meats like liver, kidneys and hearts.

- (1) E. Estyn Evans: *Irish Folk Ways*
- (2) Fergus Kelly: *Early Irish Farming*





Preserving Wild Elderberries by Drying

Spread the cleaned berries out on a rack in one layer covered with kitchen paper or muslin. If you have a really sunny place in a dry warm house that's all you need. They do attract insects so you may wish to cover with muslin. An airing cupboard is another possibility. Drying in the oven yet another possibility. Spread them out on baking trays, again in one layer, and place in a cool oven at about 50°C and no higher than 60°C or the berries will begin to cook. Occasionally dry off any moisture that collects in the oven. When absolutely dry, store in jars or sealed boxes, or even sealed paper bags.

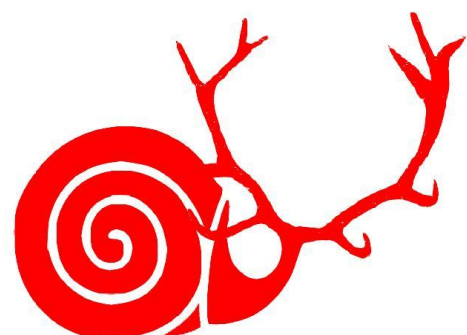
Preserving Wild Elderberries in Sugar Syrup

Bottling Elderberries is easy. First make a sugar syrup. The strength and whether you choose a light or heavy syrup depends on how sweet you prefer the finished result. Bear in mind that they are a sweet berry. One part water to two parts sugar gives medium syrup. One to one a heavy syrup. Place the water and sugar in a pot and heat gently until the sugar is dissolved. Boil for a minute or two.

Use sterilized jars with glass or metal lids. Pack tightly into the jar filling them a third at a time and adding the sugar syrup to the level of the fruit as you go. It will take about 125ml of syrup to each 500ml fruit.

Place jars on a rack or a tea towel in the bottom of a pot, choosing a large pot deep enough for the water to cover the jars by 3cm. pour hot water over. Bring to the boil for approximately 15 minutes.

Remove from the pot and place on wooden board or a tea towel to cool. Wait 24 hours and then test the seal. The lids of screw tops should have pulled down into a slightly concave position as they cool. This indicates a good seal. If it pops up when you press the top you do not have a good seal. To test the seal on glass jars with rubber seals and a clamp on top press the fruit against the lid, if any bubbles appear you do not have a good seal. It is possible to reprocess at once. Otherwise eat the food as soon as possible as it will not keep. Correctly done and stored in a cool dark place they will keep for a year.

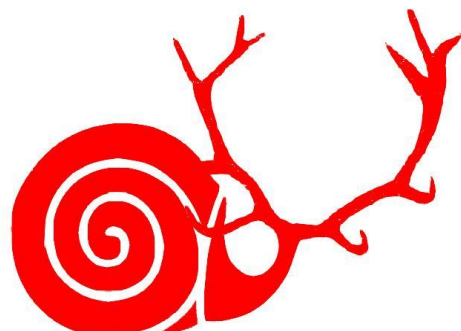


Preserving Wild Elderberries in Vinegar

Wild Elderberries can be used to make simple, flavoured vinegar. Fill a sterilised wine bottle up to the quarter line with the berries, then using a good quality wine or cider vinegar, pour over and fill to the brim; cover tightly and shake occasionally.

Preserving Wild Elderberries in spirits

Fill a wine or spirit bottle about ¼ full with sugar and up to the halfway mark with cleaned berries. Top up with the spirit of your choice. Shake occasionally. Leave for several months to mature. Then decant the flavoured spirit into a (smaller) clean bottle. The booze-laden berries may also be used to add oomph to desserts, ice cream, puddings, cakes and tarts.





Possible recipes that might be suitable for a stallholder at Wild&Slow

Wild Elderberry Syrup

3kg **Wild Elderberries**

$\frac{3}{4}$ litre water

Place the berries and water in a large pot. Bring to boiling point and simmer for 45 minutes. Strain it through a jelly bag, leaving it to drip overnight. Next day measure the juice and add the required amount of sugar. Sugar juice is measured and sugar added at the rate of 300g per litre. It was traditional to tie a few cloves in a jelly muslin bag. You may like to experiment with other spices. Warm the sugar. Meanwhile bring the juice back to the boil and simmer for a few minutes. Add sugar, stir until dissolved and boil for about 15 minutes, or until the juice is of a light syrup consistency. Skim to ensure the syrup is clear. Bottle in small sterilized bottles with tightly fitting caps. Small bottles are best because the syrup needs to be used within a reasonable time once opened. If you require really long storage follow the method described above for preserving in sugar syrup.

Wild Elderberry Jelly

1kg **Wild Elderberries**

500g crab apples, washed and halved

Sugar at the rate of 1kg per litre of juice

A jelly that maybe enjoyed and used as an ingredient for sweet dishes - in which case you may like to add some spices such as cloves or cinnamon sticks. The jelly is also excellent with all sorts of game, or teenage lamb, either as a jelly or added to sauces and pie fillings; in this case consider adding some wild thyme or wild marjoram finely chopped at the time of potting. The crab apples are needed for the pectin; without them or garden apples the jelly will not set.

Cook the two fruits in separate pots, each barely covered in a little water. This prevents the apples absorbing the colour and flavour of the berries and diluting the flavour. Strain juices though a jelly bag overnight. Do not squeeze the bag. Measure the juice and add sugar according to the formula above. Boil until it reaches setting point, skim and pour into sterilised jars and cover.





Pontack Sauce

500ml vinegar or claret, boiling hot

500ml **Wild Elderberries**

1 onion, very finely chopped

40 peppercorns

14 cloves

1 blade mace

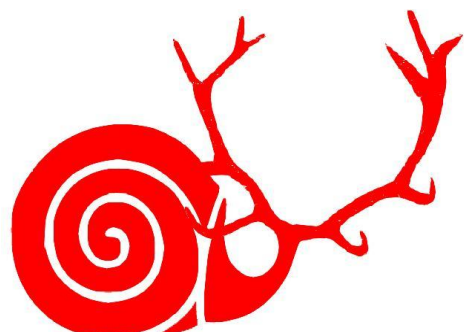
1 tsp salt

½ tsp ground ginger

This sauce is what Mrs. Beaton describes as a store sauce - what now is called a condiment, like Yorkshire relish. There are numerous references to it in old cookbooks and even descriptions of meals, but finding out exactly how it was made proved elusive - until Richard Mabey was consulted in the book that was presented to Sugar Loaf members at the start of the year. ⁽¹⁾ Its spicy and sharp if made with vinegar, rather less so if made with "claret" as the old recipe suggests. One Sugarloaf member at least intends to try it out made with elderberry wine but it will be a year or so before the results can be taste-tested.

Take a deep ovenproof dish and pour the boiling vinegar or wine over the berries. Cover and place in a very, very low oven (below 50°C) overnight. Strain the liquid and put it in a pot with all the other ingredients. Cook at boiling point for 10 minutes. Pour the liquid with the spices into small-sterilized bottles and tightly fitting caps. Traditionally used to enhance liver and other organ meats.

(1) Food for Free by Richard Mabey, Collins Gem



Wild Elderberry Wine

2kg **Wild Elderberries**

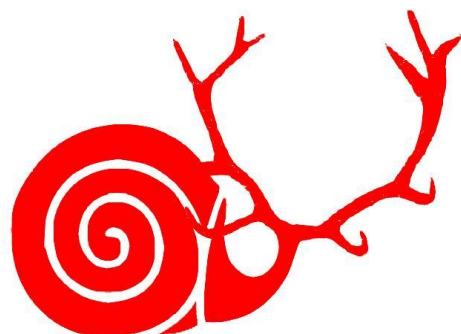
1 $\frac{3}{4}$ -2kg sugar, warmed

5 litres water

Juice of half a lemon or orange

Wine Yeast to measure

Place berries in a large pot and to help release the juice mash with a wooden potato pounder or similar utensil. Simmer the fruit in half the water for a few minutes. Stir in the sugar. Pour mixture into a fermentation bucket; add the rest of the water and the lemon juice. When cool, sprinkle half the wine yeast on top. Cover and allow to stand for about 3 days. From this moment until fermentation is complete choose a warm place - ideally 75°C. Strain through a jelly bag back into the bucket. Add the remaining wine yeast (you may if you wish add yeast nutrients) and, once dissolved, pour into 5 litre fermentation jars. Fit an airlock and ferment to a finish. It may then be syphoned into a clean fermentation jar (leaving the sediment behind) and allowed to clear. You can repeat this if the wine looks cloudy. Finally syphon into sterilized bottles; cap tightly and store in a cool place. Six months is usually the time it takes to mature and bear in mind it won't improve after two years. However, experience has shown that if you'd like to try your wine at the first Christmas after bottling, try it mulled.





Wild Elderberry Chutney

1kg **Wild Elderberries**

1 large onion, finely chopped

75g raisins

1kg crab apples

½ litre wine or cider vinegar

75-100g brown sugar (or to taste)

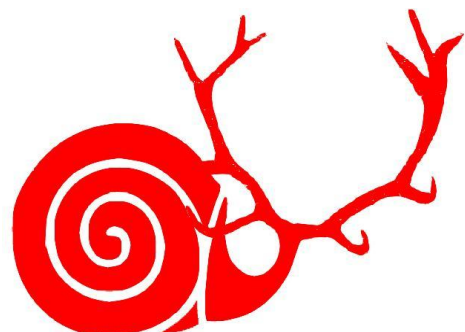
1 tsp salt

¼ tsp freshly ground black pepper

Spices, as desired. The amount and variety is a personal choice: consider nutmeg, cinnamon, mace, cloves, allspice, ginger, mustardseed, and chilli. Don't go mad with too many, or add too much.

The balance of the sweet/sour flavour is also a matter of taste - some people like rather sweet chutney, some prefer a sour. Add less sugar to start and see how you go - it's easy to add more.

Put the elderberries in a preserving pot and give them a good mash, or a bash. Add the rest of the ingredients. Bring to the boil and simmer for about 12-16 minutes, or until thick. Do your final tasting at this time and make any adjustments you wish. Stir well for another minute over heat. Pour through a wide-necked funnel into sterilised jars. It is better if the covers are not metal. Store in a cool dark place and allow to mature for several months.





Wild Elderberry Pudding Scramble

500 g dried **Wild Elderberries**, rehydrated
500 g Peeled, cored and sliced pears
150-250 g White bread, crust removed
.5 Lt Milk
50 g Butter
1 pinch Salt
Sugar and cinnamon to taste
3 Tbs flour
Lemon Juice

Melt the butter and briefly sauté the pears until soft, add elderberries. Make a thin paste of the flour and milk and add the mixture to the fruit. Add the remainder of the milk. Add enough crumbled bread, to soak juices and scramble. Season, with sugar, cinnamon, and lemon juice.

Wild Elderberry Jelly

1.8kg dried **Wild Elderberries**, rehydrated
600ml water
75g sugar per 100ml liquid

Place elderberries in a heavy-bottomed saucepan along with the water. Bring to a boil, reduce to a simmer and cook for 30 minutes, mashing the fruit against the side of the pan with a wooden spoon. Sieve through muslin and allow to drain naturally into a bowl for 24 hours.

Measure the volume of the liquid and add 75g sugar per 100ml of fluid. Place the juice in a saucepan, heat through then add the sugar, stirring until completely dissolved. Bring to a boil and cook rapidly for about 15 minutes. Test for setting by placing a plate in the fridge. Spoon a little of the jelly onto the plate, allow to chill then move it with a teaspoon. If a crinkly skin forms then the jelly is ready. If not continue boiling for 5 minutes more and test again.

Skim the surface then ladle into sterilized jars that have been sterilised in an oven set to 100°C for 5 minutes. Secure the lid, allow to cool and store.





The Nitty-Gritty

Okay...so here's the nitty-gritty, but don't let it put you off! All twelve or so of these 'Wild Food Templates' for gathering and harvesting Wild Foods have been chosen because they are highly identifiable. It is always desirable for the first time forager to go out with someone who has experience.

However, as always, it is up to you to discern what to pick, how to harvest it and preserve it in a manner that would be in keeping with and fit for our ancestors.

Remember, if in doubt.... don't!

Disclaimer

For countless generations our forefathers/mothers gathered Wild Foods and it seems they did so pretty well...after all we're all still here! However modern protocol demands that we produce a disclaimer like this. So here we go.

The above plant images, although helpful, are not for identifying purposes. It is important to use a good guide, unless you are familiar with these plants. This post is only an introduction to the plants mentioned therein, and should not be relied upon in isolation. Foraging guides of reput should always be used, and one should always err on the conservative side, remembering, that it is important to read any guide together with any caution notes, and ultimately responsibility for your safety and those that you give, serve or sell these foods to, lies with you.

All information contained including various recipes are purely for illustrative and informative purposes only and ultimately it is the user that determines as to how the above mentioned Wild Food, might be used.

