

American Elderberry
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American elderberry is a perennial shrub that can be found across all vegetational areas of Texas with the exception of the Trans Pecos area. The occurrence of this plant becomes less frequent as you travel from east to west across the state. This multi-stemmed shrub spreads by seeds, shoots and rhizomes. It can be a small tree, but is rarely seen taller than 9 to 12 feet due to browsing. The bark is thin covering a thick white pith. Stems can be smooth, angular or grooved, green to red on new growth and reddish to gray on older growth. The stems often show many small white warty bumps. Leaves are opposite, up to 12 inches in length, odd-pinnately compound with 5 to 11 leaflets. The odd-pinnately compound means there will be a single leaflet at the terminal end of the leaf. Each leaflet is 1 to 2 inches wide and 2 to 6 inches in length, broadly lanceolate, with tips rounded or pointed, and margins being sharply toothed. The upper leaf surfaces are bright green and smooth while lower surfaces are paler with thin or dense fine hairs.

The showy flowers are terminal on stems in large clusters either in convex or flattened inflorescences. The tiny individual flowers are white with five petals and grow up to ¼ inch in width on short tubes. Another shrub with similar shaped flower clusters with small white flowers in five petals is rusty blackhaw but the leaves are not bi-pinnately compound so identification is easy. Fruits are small drupes, very numerous in clusters being about ⅛ inch in diameter, deep purple to black and shiny with each containing three to four small roughened seeds. If you want to gather some of the fruit clusters you will have to watch and make sure the fruits are deep purple then harvest or birds will beat you to the fruits. Look for the ripening fruits beginning in July through early fall.

American Elderberry, *Sambucus nigra ssp. canadensis*, provides good browse value to deer, cattle and goats. Crude protein of the leaves averages 18 percent, stems 7 percent, and fruits 14 percent. More than 40 species of birds, including quail and turkey, are known to eat the seeds. Its importance as a wildlife plant would be greater if the plant was more widespread, but overgrazing has limited its abundance. The ripe fruits have been made into wine, syrup, pies, preserves and jelly, but the unripe fruits, leaves, stems and roots are poisonous to humans. Even though parts of the plant are poisonous it has also been used medicinally for centuries. For many decades whistles have been made from finger sized stems of elderberry owing to the ease of removing the pith and hollowing out the stem. The flower clusters are seen from May through June and often again in September and will be visited by many small pollinator species.

To find elderberry on your property look for it growing along perennial creek and river banks and out into the floodplain areas. While mostly found along these riparian areas occasionally it will be found on uplands that may have a perched water table. It can grow in full sun or in the dappled shade under mature trees. To manage for an increase in elderberry on your land limit brush clearing in riparian areas and reduce deer numbers, especially exotic animals. Elderberry has potential to reduce erosion along creek banks if rooted cuttings are planted in moist soil. Prune old growth that is three years or older to promote vigorous new growth which produces more fruit. Along with maintaining livestock numbers within the carrying capacity of the land, these measures will allow elderberry and other desirable woody plants to produce seed and spread. I hope your search for American elderberry on your property is fruitful.

Photo captions:

1 The new tender growth of American elderberry receives browsing due to the palatable, nutritious foliage.



2 Elderberry showing the root-sprouting habit that enables this plant to spread but not become aggressive or invasive.



3 Early growth and formation of flower clusters.



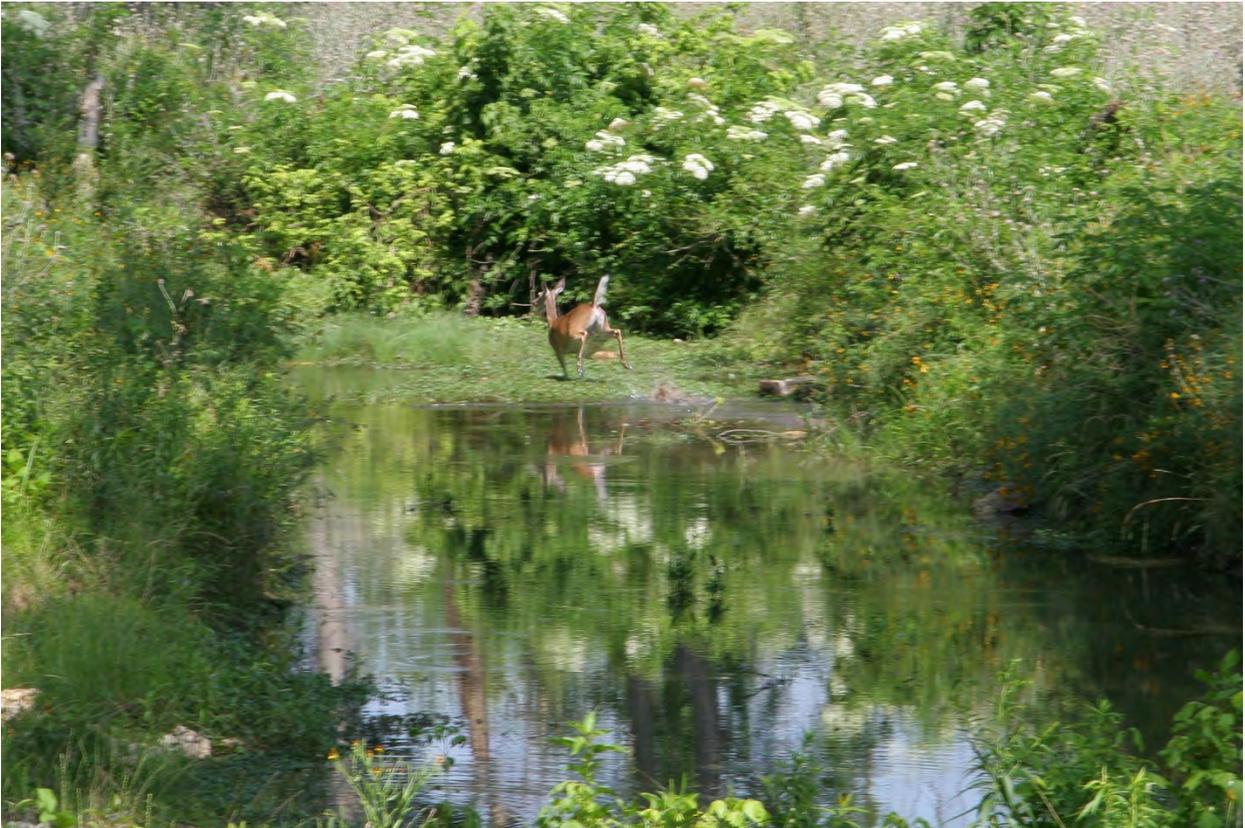
4 Summer growth with full flower clusters also benefits pollinators.



5 Mature fruits show the deep purple to black coloration and await harvest by birds or jelly-makers.



6 Elderberry behind white-tailed fawn on banks of a spring that feeds into Salado Creek in Bell county.



7 Elderberry provides excellent bank stabilization reducing erosion along streams and rivers but browsing by native and exotic deer must be under control for survival of the plants.

