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Respect your elders

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By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: Flowering in June, this elder went on to add 4' of growth strong enough to trellis peas. (Journal photo by Alex Féthière)

I'm exploiting my workers. They're building a nursery for me and I pay them nothing but black and blue elderberries. That's probably why they do such a slapdash job: they never label anything and drop it hither and yon.

I don't see any reason to give them a raise, especially seeing that I never get any of the berries I planted myself. Birds help themselves, but it's really the elderberries that are best served.

When the first volunteer elderberry plants appeared, I didn't make the connection because I hadn't seen any berries on my plants. A year later, I figured out that the birds were eating the berries before they ripened.

Spring's clusters of tiny delicate flowers are our cue to watch the bushes closely, even to net or cage them. Any time after the berries form the birds will eat them.

Don't confuse blue and black elderberries with the red ones (*Sambucus racemosa*). I've seen them towering around Mason County in landscaping and wilderness. They are neither palatable nor edible, but wildlife enjoy them.

I am growing all three species of elderberry useful to humans: *Sambucus nigra*, *caerulea* and *canadensis*. *S. caerulea* is native in Washington and an excellent pollinator plant. Several of my plants are cultivars such as Samdal, Bob Gordon or Korsor. Though they are self-pollinating, fruit yields improve when at least two of different cultivars are planted.

That explains the elderberry critical mass I reached this year, when there were more berries than the birds could gorge on. There were still too few to make elderberry wine; next spring I will harvest a lot of flowers for other uses without saving them all for berries.

Parentage is impossible to ascertain in this free-love environment. Even taste wouldn't work after waiting years for the bushes to start yielding: the apple does, in fact, fall far from the tree.

Like apples, elderberries are not true-to-type. They can even be rooted from cuttings. When pruning I will take hardwood cuttings with two nodes from my prize elder, dip the cut end in rooting hormone

and stick them in the ground. It's generally recommended to have finished that by September, but in our mild autumns it's worth a try.

I've been transplanting volunteers, many of which sprouted in shaded areas, to steep hillsides under heavy tree canopies. Even if they don't bear, they will hold soil and add diversity. Tendency to root sprout makes elders useful for erosion control and forest restoration.

A couple of words of caution: Pierce's disease, which ruins grapevines, can be harbored in elderberry. It needs certain insect vectors for transmission and hasn't yet been seen north of California, but with our new heat waves I thought I'd mention it.

The bacteria can also reside in Himalayan blackberries, but for all that I have seen many varieties of grape thrive here. I keep my grapes and elderberry separated with buffers of undisturbed forest between them.

Then, consider elder's alleged allelopathy. Allelopathy is the chemical repellency or suppression of competing plants: we've probably all heard of not using cedar chips near plants or siting black walnuts near many other types of woody plant.

The internet will furnish you with shovelfuls of hysteria about the allelopathic properties of elderberry, but the one credible source I could find, a U.S. Department of Agriculture paper from Corvallis, Oregon, examined only red elderberry. "Little effect has been discerned in the field," but in experimental conditions red elderberry inhibited germination and growth of Douglas fir.

Gasp! Don't worry, our economy is safe. Even if red elders could compete with ragwort tansy, scotch broom and Himalayan blackberry, the herbicides would lay them low.

■ *Alex Féthière has lived on Harstine Island long enough to forget New York City, where he built community gardens and double-dug his suburban sod into a victory garden. He can be reached at onlandist@gmail.com.*