



www.clipartof.com · 1119772

www.clipartof.com · 1119772

www.clipartof.com · 1119772

The Elder Tree

As I sit to write this, I know that the last flowers are fading on the many elder trees that surround Sutterby church. The elder- *sambucus nigra* - is now seen as a "weed", but I doubt those inhabitants of old Sutterby would agree! To quote John Evelyn on the subject -"if the medicinal properties of the leaves, bark, berries, etc. were thoroughly known, I cannot tell of what our country- men could ail, for which he might not fetch a remedy from every hedge". It was known as the countryman's medicine chest.

The name elder comes from the Anglo-Saxon 'aeld' meaning " fire" - the hollow stumps being used to blow up a fire in the days before bellows. It also furnished many a country child with flutes and pop- guns! It was often called the pipe-tree or bore-tree. The mature wood is white and has a close and fine grain. It is easily cut and polishes well. It was used to make butchers skewers, shoemakers' pegs, the turned ends for fishing rods, needles for weaving nets, combs and instruments both musical and mathematical.

In "The Mystery of Husbandry" (1675) elder is included in a list of trees "necessary and proper for fencing and enclosing of lands". It continues " a considerable fence may be made of elder set of reasonable hasty truncheons, like the willow and may be laid with great curiosity: this makes a speedy shelter for a garden from winds, beasts and such like injuries". It is said that an elder stake will last in the ground longer than an iron bar of the same size - hence -" an eldern stake and a blackthorn ether will make a hedge to last forever".

But on to elder's medicine chest itself - the leaves were collected and used fresh or dried. They contain the alkaloid sambucine, the glucoside sambunigrin and a purgative resin as well as hydrocyanic acid, cane sugar, potassium nitrate and a crystalline substance - eldrin.

They were used to make a domestic remedy called "green elder ointment" for bruises, sprains, chilblains and to apply to open wounds. To quote Sir Thomas Browne (1655) "

the common people keep as a good secret in curing wounds the leaves of the elder, which they have gathered the last day of April". The leaves formed an ingredient of cooling ointments for piles, tumours, swellings and wounds. The leaves also act as a purgative and their action is also expectorant, diuretic and diaphoretic. They were used to treat dropsy, eye inflammation, and nervous headaches. If all this wasn't enough, a decoction of bruised leaves drove away flies, killed aphids and banished mosquitoes and midges.

The elder flowers, when distilled, furnished the countrywoman with elder-flower water. This cleared the complexion of freckles and sunburn. It would keep her skin fair and white and free from blemishes. Elder flowers placed directly in the water she washed in would whiten and soften hands and face. Elder-flower water was also used to soothe inflamed eyes.

Elder-flower tea was used to treat colds, sore throats and influenza and externally on boils and piles. An ointment prepared from the flowers infused in warm lard was applied to burns and scalds and used as a basis for cosmetic ointments (!) and last but not least for treating wounded horses.

Elderberry juice was held to be efficacious in cases of rheumatism, syphilis, colic, diarrhoea, epilepsy and piles (again). Elderberry wine was taken hot at night as a remedy for severe catarrh, influenza, chills and asthma. Boiling elderberries with sugar to form elderberry rob has long been an invaluable aid in the treatment of winter coughs and colds.

In a country pantry one might have found elderberry wine, elderberry jam, elder-flower vinegar and cordial and even elderberry chutney and elderberry ketchup. I, myself, make jam, cordial and chutney from the above list and can vouch for elderberry rob (especially good with a splash of brandy!).

Now what of the tree itself? Unlucky to cut down and never to be burnt on the fire. The tree that a witch could turn herself into. The very personality of an elder tree was held to come from the " Elder Mother " whose spirit dwelt within the tree. In Norse and Viking myths she was " elle" or " hyldemoer". She would avenge any who harmed her trees. The elder has many names - Lady Ellhorn, Old Lady, and Old Sal. It was believed that if an elder sapling sprang up by your cottage the Elder Mother had

chosen to protect your home and you must never cut it down or bad luck would befall you and all your family.

Stand beneath an elder tree on midsummer night and you stand a chance of seeing the Faerie King and his entourage ride by. But if you are bewitched and carried away by them to the other world , you may never return.....

Paul Mobbs.

July 2014