

Native Berries Growing Guide

Plants with berries and berry-like fruits abound in North America, and they play an important role as food sources and in the cultural histories and practices of people throughout the region. Below we'll look at three native berries: elderberry, sumac, and juniper.

Other berries native to North America include bayberry, blackberry, [blueberry](#), cranberry, dewberry, hackberry, huckleberry, juneberry (aka serviceberry), lingonberry, mulberry, [raspberry](#), salmonberry, snowberry, [strawberry](#), thimbleberry, and wolfberry.



Elderberry

Elderberries are large shrubs to small trees that have a long history of cultivation. The most commonly grown types are American elderberry (*Sambucus canadensis*) and European elderberry (*S. nigra*). Both produce large clusters of white flowers in early summer, followed by an abundance of purple-black, berry-like fruits in late summer.

The American elderberry is native to the northeast U.S. and Canada. Reaching 5-10' tall, it's more compact than its European cousin, making it a good choice for school and youth gardens that have the space and can meet its need for full sun and consistently moist soils. In the wild, it's often found along the edges of ponds and lakes. Elderberries offer countless opportunities for learning about ecosystems, nutrition, and Indigenous cultures.

Elderberry has a long history of use among Native Peoples, who use all plant parts in a variety of ways. Elderflower tea is used to treat fevers and added to baths to induce sweating. The fruits are cooked into sauces or dried for later use, and are also used to treat coughs and colds. An infusion of the leaves is used to treat skin ailments, and the wood is crafted into musical instruments.

Elderberry flowers attract bees and other pollinators, and the fruits provide food for many species of birds and mammals. Elderberries are also an attractive landscape plant and there are numerous cultivated varieties, some with dramatic dark purple foliage. **Note that the fruit of European red elderberry (*Sambucus racemose*) is highly toxic to humans; therefore, this plant is not recommended for youth gardens.**

Elderberry fruits are high in vitamins, notably A and C, as well as a variety of minerals. They're also rich in antioxidants, and elderberry tinctures and syrups touted to support the immune system are widely available. Elderberries should always be cooked before being eaten. Enjoy the fruits in pies and jams; use elderberry syrup in hot and cold beverages as well as savory dishes. The culinary and educational uses are endless!

Sumac

There are about 35 species of sumac (genus *Rhus*), several of which are native to North America. Most sumacs form shrubs or small trees and produce dense flower spikes that mature into clusters of red, berry-like fruits called drupes. They spread by seeds, often carried by birds, and by shoots/suckers that emerge from underground rhizomes. Sumac plants can quickly form extensive colonies and can become weedy or invasive in certain regions and habitats. Although sumac can be planted in youth and school gardens, its habit of aggressively spreading makes it a challenging addition. One technique involves surrounding the plant with a sturdy root barrier that extends at least 2' deep, supplemented by frequent inspection for and removal of any escaping shoots.

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Sumac species that are native to North America include smooth sumac (*Rhus glabra*), staghorn sumac (*R. hirta*), and fragrant sumac (*R. aromatica*). These species resemble each other and are used similarly by Indigenous Peoples.

The ripe berries (botanically, they are drupes) are tart and acidic. Although they are sometimes eaten raw or dried, the berries are most commonly crushed, steeped in cold water overnight, and strained to remove the tiny hairs on the berries, resulting in a refreshing drink that is sometimes sweetened with honey or maple syrup. They are also commonly ground and cooked with cornmeal into a pudding. In spring, young, peeled roots and shoots are also eaten. Sumac is also used to treat a variety of ailments, notably those relating to digestion, sore throats and colds, and skin irritations. Dyes are made from the berries. The dried leaves are combined with tobacco and smoked in ceremonies, and sumac wood is used to craft pipes.

The fruits of *Rhus coriaria*, a sumac species native to southern Europe and western Asia, are ground into a powder that is used in Middle Eastern and Arab cuisines.

Many animals eat sumac berries, including birds and small mammals. Deer eat the bark, twigs, and berries.

Note that sumacs are members of the cashew family. Those with an allergy to cashews should avoid consuming sumac. Poison sumac, poison ivy, and poison oak were formerly classified in the genus *Rhus* but are now classified in the genus *Toxicodendron*. Poison sumac has white or yellowish berries, in contrast to the red berries of the sumac plants described above.

Juniper

Junipers are woody shrubs in the genus *Juniperis* and are common throughout the northern hemisphere. Most species are either small trees growing up to 30' tall or low, spreading shrubs. Junipers are conifers (cone-bearing plants). The abundant small "berries" they produce aren't true berries; rather, they are female seed cones with fleshy scales that surround the seeds within. These aromatic berries start out green and mature to purple-blue or gray-blue. The plants are dioecious, meaning that there are separate male and female plants, and only the female plants produce the berries. The dusty gray coating on juniper berries is a wild yeast, which explains why the berries have been used to make beer and bread.

Junipers are used by Indigenous Peoples in numerous ways. The berries are eaten for their nutritional value and to flavor meats and stews. Tea made from the berries is used for medicinal properties, notably relating to digestion and childbirth, to treat colds and congestion, and to stimulate the appetite. The seeds inside the berries are dried and used as decorative beads, known as ghost beads. Research indicates that juniper berries have antiseptic, anti-inflammatory, and anti-viral properties.

Juniper plays an important role in purification ceremonies and is called the "medicine tree" by some Indigenous Peoples. Juniper ash, made by burning juniper branches and collecting the ash, contains an abundance of calcium and other minerals and is stirred into various dishes. The Navajo people add it to blue corn mush, where it both adds calcium and, due to its alkalinity, helps release the nutrients contained in the cornmeal. Juniper ash mixed with water is used to treat a variety of ailments. Juniper wood is used as fuel, to make shelter and utensils, and in ceremonies.

Although junipers can be grown in school and youth gardens, they have some drawbacks. Juniper berries contain small amounts of thujone, an oily substance that can cause stomach upset if consumed in large quantities. The needlelike foliage of some types is unpleasantly scratchy. Finally, the berry yield is low relative to the amount of space the plants require, and the berries take two years to ripen fully. If you choose to grow junipers, choose varieties carefully and carefully monitor and limit consumption of the berries.

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