

Leaves and flowers Spring to mind!

■ by Thomas Schorr-Kon, Trackways

There is much folklore bound up with the use of herbal medicine and none more so than with Elderflower (*Sambucus nigra*). Here is a tree or should I say a bush that has received rather bad press over the years. Witches were supposed to be able to turn themselves in to Elder trees and if you cut one and it bled it was a witch in disguise - not something I have ever encountered. Perhaps because all the witches were burned around the time these rumours were being spread. Another belief that was prevalent at this time was that Judas had hung himself on an elder tree. Now some of you may know how weak elder is due to its pithy core, so either he was not serious about suicide or there is some ulterior motive going on to try to halt the use of certain remedies and to demonise them. Yet here is a tree that has some miraculous healing qualities and every part of the plant has some healing use. It is truly an 'elder' within the healing community. There is also an aversion to burning Elder as firewood partly because of these various folk stories. Yet the truth is, it is a very bad and smoky fire wood and is better for starting fires used as a hand drill. I like Juliette de Bairacli Levy's view taken from her time spent with European and Middle Eastern gypsies

"It is sacred to the gypsies who will not burn it as wood in their fires: they declare that a tree which can help all the ailments of mankind and can restore sight to the blind is too precious to burn" The restoration of sight to the blind that is



referred to here is when the lost of sight is through shock, such as from a bomb blast, and it is the flowers here that would be used for this purpose. The eyes are washed with a cooled infusion of elderflower.

The flowers taken internally have a number of medicinal



Elderflower

applications they soothe headaches (especially those brought on by too much sun), calm upset stomachs, and a strong brew will promote sweating and is good for the throwing of a fever. Elderflower is often used in cold remedies, though the raw flowers can have a laxative and sedative effect. A cold infusion of the flowers can cool and

sooth chapped hands and can even be used for sun burn, while hot infusions excite, i.e. promote sweating, and stimulate. Externally the flowers made into a salve are beneficial for the skin bringing down swelling, and a cooled infusion is excellent for eye conditions as mentioned above.

The flowers are also delicious dipped in batter and fried, as are many flowers, though it is a great recipe to try on those who are first time eaters of wild food.

Henry Box a famous Quaker herbalist spoke of Elder in rather poetic but poignant terms:

"It will not only save at the eleventh hour, but at the last minute of that hour. It is so harmless that you can not use it a miss, and so effectual that you cannot give it in vain"

This is a great description of the use of the flowers, as for the leaves I mentioned several uses for Elder leaves in the last article so I shall move strait on to the inner bark which has been used successfully to treat epilepsy, though I have included no details here as the action of this is quite strong so herbalist advice should be sought.

The flowers are also used to make wine, cordial and a fizzy wine like champagne.

The berries I shall deal with closer to their autumn time appearance later in the year as they are a good survival food and have medicinal properties too.



The most interesting experience I have had with elder was after teaching at Glastonbury festival many years ago, the festival was over and as I surveyed the site, I was dismayed by the devastation that was left by the thousands of humans that had rampaged over the many acres of fields. The thing that really affected me was the smell, the site was just so stinky. The fence had been taken down, so I set off up towards the Kings Hill at the back of the festival above the green fields for a bit of a relaxing walk and some tracking. As I got farther away from signs of human activity, it was not just the 'bears' who had done their business in the woods, if you follow my meaning. So beyond these rather unpleasant offerings I found some well established badger runs, wide trails with many badger tracks over them.

One thing that is quite endearing about badgers is that when they make scat they dig a hole for it and often use the same place unless they are caught on the hop. As I tuned in and followed the many badger signs and trails I was moving amongst the trees when I came to the largest Elder flower bush (no, this one was a tree) that I had seen.



It was a warm June day and from fifty yards I could smell the fragrant blossom - I was delighted. As I came closer I realised that under this tree was a vast badger latrine, yet the Elderflower was all that could be smelt. I was suddenly struck by the clever choice of site for the summer latrine that these badgers had made, and how it contrasted with the stinky site every one had just left behind. It made me reflect on how we call them dumb animals and how untrue this is. How we needed to follow their example.

It also highlighted the symbiosis between plant and animal as the elder was obviously doing very well on the badger manure it was getting.

Another symbiotic relationship Elder has is with the mushroom Jew's ear. This grows on Elder and looks rather like a eathery ear.



Jew's ear

It is an 'edible' though needs a fair bit of cooking. The name 'Jew's ear' it occurs to, me may stem from the folk lore mentioned above about Judas and shows that much of our history is bound up with these trees and plants. When we can separate the political expedience of certain superstitions from the plants we can be reunited with some powerful healing allies.