



Elderberry: The power fruit

By Chris Kilham

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Father Hermann Josef Weidinger conveys the contentment of a man who has performed great works.

Austria's most beloved herbal healer, the 82-year-old Catholic priest has penned a dozen books, and more than 100 botanical products bear his imprimatur. High on the list of his most favorite plants is elderberry.

"Elderberry cleanses the digestive system and promotes [healthy](#) elimination," he explains. "I believe that elderberry protects the body from serious diseases, and it balances the emotions. Elderberry is good for the soul."

Father Weidinger's reverence for elder *Sambucus nigra*, recalls the Austrian folk expression "tip your hat to the elder," connoting the respect that should be extended to the bush whose berries and flowers are used for health purposes. This reverence can be traced back to 400 BC when Hippocrates called elder his "medicine chest." Renowned classical healers Theophrastus, Dioscorides and Galen also declared the elder and its rich purple berries among nature's greatest healing plants. Employed for a plethora of ills from arthritis and asthma to colds and constipation, elderberries occupy an esteemed position in European plant medicine.

But elderberry is not lost in a romantic past of bygone herbalists. Today at Germany's research center for food, agriculture and forestry, Dr. Gerhard Rechkemmer is investigating the anthocyanins - purple antioxidant pigments - in elderberry. His research shows that elderberry enhances immune function by boosting the production of cytokines.

"In vitro the anthocyanins in elderberry show very high antioxidant activity. But they are extremely hard to track in blood plasma, so we do not know exactly what they are doing in the body."

When asked if he thinks that further elderberry research will reveal additional [health benefits](#), Rechkemmer nods. "I believe so, but we must go beyond belief to certain knowledge."

With scientific examination of elderberry's biological activity underway, Austrian elderberry production is increasing rapidly due to strong market demand. At 8,000 tons of cultivated elderberry per year, Austria's commercial production is strong. Much of this is due to the work of Kurt Kaufmann, a seemingly indefatigable elderberry proponent who has organized one thousand Austrian growers into a co-op, and built Berenfrost, an immense non-profit berry freezing facility where elderberries are cooled immediately after harvest.

"In September at harvest, the elderberries must be cooled immediately, or they spoil. Here at Berenfrost elderberries are chilled to -20A,C in less than 24 hours."

I ask Kurt how much tonnage of berries he can take in on one day. "We can handle about 600 tons per day, but last year one day we took in 1,600 tons in 24 hours."

I ask him if he sleeps.

"Not during harvest," he replies with a wide smile.

Austria's Haschberg variety of elder produces a high yield of sweet, richly purple berries. After freezing at Berenfrost, the berries move into the food and beverage industry, where they are used in juices, jams, fruit [yogurts](#) and wines. Demand is also growing for high anthocyanin elderberry extracts for the nutraceutical field. Amidst this berry boom, Doctors Werner Pfannhauser and Michael Murkovic at Austria's University of Graz have conducted research showing that elderberry extract reduces oxidation of LDL cholesterol and exhibits a beneficial antioxidant effect in the body.

These results do not come as a surprise. In vitro, anthocyanins from elderberry demonstrate unusually high antioxidant activity- much greater in fact than highly touted bilberry.

"I am certain that elderberry is beneficial," notes Murcovic.

Endocrinologist Dr. Sepp Porta describes an exciting stress study he conducted using elderberry concentrate on a group of volunteers.

"We only gave these people the elderberry for 10 days," he notes with expressive hand gestures. "We put them through typical stress tests, and the results were so remarkable, I checked them over and over."

In the study, various bio-markers of stress, including glucose, magnesium and other plasma chemical levels, were analyzed. "What we found was that elderberry has this extraordinary effect for reducing stress," notes Porta. It is for this reason that researchers from the US Air Force sit with us. Elderberry may hold promise for stress reduction among military personnel.

Austria's largest elderberry producer Josef Holler smiles at Porta's words. "We are involved in a very good thing. It is good for people's lives. This is satisfying." He raises a glass of dark red Austrian wine for a toast to the noble elderberry, and we all drink to that.

Chris Kilham is a medicine hunter who researches natural remedies all over the world, from the Amazon to Siberia. He teaches ethnobotany courses at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where he is Explorer In Residence. Chris advises herbal, cosmetic and pharmaceutical companies and is a regular guest on radio and TV programs worldwide. His field research is largely sponsored by Naturex of Avignon, France. Read more at www.MedicineHunter.com

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