

# CROSS POLLINATION

Halton Master Gardeners Monthly Newsletter  
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Halton Region  
Master Gardeners



Elderberry Flowerheads in June - Photo J. Padiak

## Blossoms and Berries: The Versatile Common Elderberry (*Sambucus canadensis*)

By Janet Padiak, Halton Master Gardeners

Known to gardeners as *Sambucus canadensis*, our Common Elderberry is a versatile shrub valued for its creamy-white flower clusters in June-July and purple-black berries that follow in late summer. The flower heads, the berries and the woody branches have a long history of use by Indigenous peoples as medicines, food and tools. Today, gardeners find that *Sambucus canadensis* is a key plant in the natural garden to attract pollinators, offer food for birds and provide nesting spots for insects.

*Sambucus canadensis* is native to eastern North America from Manitoba to the Maritimes. In the natural environment, it can be found in moist locations, such as swamps and riverbanks, where it can grow to 4 M in height and width. In the garden, it is happy on medium soil in sun or part shade, typically only growing to 2.5 M. *Sambucus canadensis* is self-fertile, but to increase pollination and yield, it is advised to plant two, no more than 20 M apart.



Ripe elderberry clusters. Photo: J. Padiak

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## THE VERSATILE COMMON ELDERBERRY (CONT'D)

The Elderberry's versatility begins with its fragrant white flowers. When fresh, they can be used to make elderflower cordial or dipped in batter and fried to make delicious pancakes. Dried flowers are used for tea. The small purplish-black berries (technically drupes) are high in antioxidants. If you can get to the berries before the birds—finches, robins and cardinals in my garden—they can be cooked into jams or pies. Alternately the whole berries can be boiled briefly and strained, and the juice can be used for jelly or syrup. **Note: The berries are not suitable for fresh eating and for safety must always be cooked first.**

The Common Elderberry's versatility continues with its stems. The pith is soft and makes a great nesting spot for stem-nesting bees. When trimmed and hollowed out, the stem can be made into a simple whistle or flute. Elderberry wood has traditionally been used for basketry, blowpipes and spindles by Indigenous peoples.



Elderberry flower head. Photo: J. Padiak

Today, the Common Elderberry is experiencing a surge in popularity, driven largely by the demand for natural foods and natural food dyes. Elderberry's antioxidant properties make it a favourite for those seeking natural remedies for colds and sore throats. Extracts of the flowers can be found in everything from kombucha to ice cream. While few of us will bake a pie or carve a whistle (well, I have...), we can appreciate the role of *Sambucus canadensis* for diversity in the natural landscape.

### DETAILS AT A GLANCE



PART SHADE

FULL SUN



MOIST

MEDIUM

**Plant Type (Family):** Large deciduous shrub (*Viburnaceae*)

**Height/Width:** (H) 1.5-4.0 M (5-12')  
(W) 1.5-4.0 M (5-12')

**Flowers:** 15 cm/6" wide creamy white clusters (inflorescences) in June-July

**Berries:** fragrant purple-black drupes in late summer, edible only when cooked

**Faunal Value:** source of pollen for bees and berries for birds; bees nest in hollow stems; larval host for many moths such as Elder Pearl and Cecropia moths; attractive to butterflies

**Companion Plants:** rain garden plants including Bee Balm, Swamp Milkweed and Ironweed. Juglone tolerant.

**Tolerates:** damp soil, acidic soil

**Growing advice:** multi-stemmed, clump forming, easy to shape; propagate from cuttings or seed

**Native Range:** Manitoba, Ontario, Québec, NS, NB and PEI

#### Supports



[Vascan Range](#)

### References

- Johnson, L., & Colla, S. (2022). *A Garden for the Rusty-Patched Bumblebee*. Madeira Park, BC: Douglas & McIntyre.
- OMAFRA. (2022). *Factsheet #22-031 Growing Elderberries for Home Gardens*.
- USDA Plant Database. (2002). *Common Elderberry Plant Guide*.
- Elderberry in a mixed border - Hamilton Monarch Award Winner's Garden*.





**NOVEMBER GARDEN 'TO DO' LIST**

By Claudette Sims, Halton Master Gardener

- ☐ **General Garden Care**—Empty or cover decorative pots and store in a dry place to avoid damage from freezing. Turn off water supply to the garden and disconnect hoses and accessories. Empty watering cans and hang garden hoses to drain for winter storage.
- ☐ **Stems & Seedheads**—Leave seedheads and stalks intact over the winter. Stems offer shelter for cavity dwelling native bees & beneficial insects and also collect snow to insulate and protect plants. Seedheads provide food for birds and winter interest for everyone.
- ☐ **Bulbs**—Plant spring flowering bulbs as long as the soil is workable. You may also have time to divide and replant overcrowded spring bulbs. Water bulbs after planting.
- ☐ **Trees and shrubs**—Check tree stakes and inspect any ties or wires to ensure they will not damage or girdle tree bark. Protect young trees and shrubs from damage with tree guards or chicken wire (60 cm/24" high) or by using wire baskets to cover very small trees or shrubs.
- ☐ **Bare Soil**—Protect bare soil from erosion and winter sun with a layer of organic matter, e.g., compost, leaves, straw or manure. [Avoid tilling](#) which destroys soil structure and soil organisms and encourages weeds to germinate.
- ☐ **Houseplants**—Check individual plants, **before** you water. If the soil feels dry/hard or the plant "feels light" for its size, it is likely time to water. If the soil feels cool/moist or the plant "feels heavy", wait and retest in a few days. Check for pests weekly & treat appropriately. Increase lighting in low light areas with [grow lights](#) or reflective surfaces. Watch this [video](#) to learn why misting is no longer recommended to raise humidity!

**Hallowe'en Pumpkin Do's and Don'ts***NEVER throw pumpkins (or straw bates, etc.) in natural areas or parks!***Do's**

- Make pies, muffins, soup (small pie pumpkins)
- Roast seeds for snacks
- Compost large and decorative pumpkins and gourds
- Check online for donation ideas such as the [Oakville Pumpkin Parade](#)

- ☐ **Lawn and Weeds**—Rake or "mow" leaves and remove to garden beds. Leave [some leaves uncut for beneficial insects](#) and pollinators who overwinter in leaf litter. Keep on weeding as long as the soil is workable. When mowing is done for the season, clean the mower and sharpen the blades.
- ☐ **Invasive Plants**—Remove any invasive plant seedlings like [multiflora rose](#), [common buckthorn](#) and [garlic mustard](#). MG Sean James shows you how to [remove larger weed tree seedlings](#) using needle nose plyers! Continue to hand pull, rake or cut off weeds at ground level with a sharp spade or garden tool. Remove and dispose of seedheads to reduce the seed bank in your soil.
- ☐ **Seeds and Winter Sowing**—Continue to collect seeds to sow or share. Here's another great [video](#) from MG Sean James to simplify growing your own plants this winter.
- ☐ **2025 Planning**—Take notes for next year. What needs to be moved, divided or pruned? Are plants located where you can enjoy their blooms? Do you have plants blooming spring through fall? What plants should be replaced to better support biodiversity? Read about these [Monarch Award gardens](#) for inspiration.

- ☐ Check our [October newsletter](#) for any garden jobs that you may have missed!



## Where Have All the Flowers Gone? Raising Awareness of Canada's Native Plant Decline

By Nikolina Radulovich, Halton Master Gardeners

Imagine walking through a meadow filled with vibrant wildflowers, towering trees, and swaying grasses. Now, picture that meadow fading away—its colors dimming and its species disappearing, overtaken by cities or invasive plants. This isn't a far-off scenario. Canada's plant biodiversity is rapidly declining, and it's happening before our eyes. The recent study, *"Where Have All the Flowers Gone? A Systematic Evaluation of Factors Driving Native Terrestrial Plant Decline in North America,"* by Ryan S. Prosser and Richard A. Brain, highlights the alarming loss of native plant species in North America. Canada is deeply affected.

For thousands of years, Indigenous peoples in Canada carefully managed the land using controlled burns, and other techniques to keep ecosystems in balance. Their practices supported native plants and allowed biodiversity to thrive. However, this balance was shattered with the arrival of European settlers in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The expansion of agriculture triggered massive deforestation and clearing of land, transforming prairies into farmland. Between 1850 and 1950, over 133 million acres of natural habitats were lost to farming.

Southern Ontario's forests shrank from 80% to just 15%, and more than 65% of Canada's grasslands in southern Ontario, the Prairie provinces, and southern British Columbia have been turned into cropland. This drastic change is not just numbers on a page—it represents the vanishing homes of countless plant species.

In recent decades, urbanization has only worsened the problem. Growing cities swallow up croplands and natural areas, leaving even fewer spaces for native plants to thrive. Prime agricultural lands, which once supported diverse ecosystems, are being converted into concrete landscapes.

In addition to habitat loss, invasive species are further accelerating the decline of native plants. These non-native species were often introduced by European settlers during the [Columbian Exchange](#). Invasive plants disrupt ecosystems by competing with native species for nutrients, space, and water, often altering soil composition and water availability. They have become one of the most significant factors driving native plant loss, drastically changing plant communities in regions across Canada.

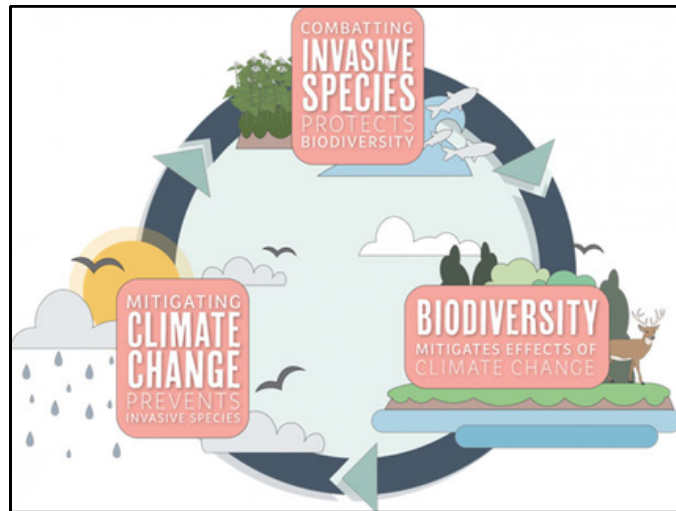


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## WHERE HAVE ALL THE FLOWERS GONE? (CONT'D)

Climate change is also playing a destructive role. Rising temperatures, erratic weather patterns, and extreme events are making survival more difficult for many native species. Climate change is also accelerating the spread of plant diseases and invasive pests, adding another layer of pressure on Canada's already struggling plant life.



"Together, invasive species and climate change reduce ecosystem resilience and negatively impact biodiversity."

Text and Image: [Invasive Species Centre](#)

Despite these challenges, there is hope. The Canadian government has recognized the urgency of the situation, listing [253 plant species](#) as threatened, endangered, or of special concern. These species are most at risk due to habitat loss, invasive species, and climate change. Recovery plans are being developed to address these issues, but the scale of the problem demands widespread action.

Interestingly, while pesticides, especially herbicides, receive significant public attention, their role in the decline of native plants is relatively minor. Studies show that herbicide impacts on non-target plants are usually localized and short-lived, further emphasizing that habitat destruction and invasive species are far more pressing threats.

The decline of native plants in Canada is not just an ecological loss but a pressing environmental issue that requires immediate action.

The public must raise awareness, support conservation efforts, and advocate for sustainable development. Without action, we risk losing not only the flowers but the entire ecosystems they support.

### Reference

- Prosser, R. S., & Brain, R. A. (2024). [Where have all the flowers gone? A systematic evaluation of factors driving native terrestrial plant decline in North America](#). Environmental Science and Pollution Research, 31, 48460–48483.

### Did You Know?

- The horticultural trade is the **primary pathway** for the introduction of invasive plants in Canada.
- Many nurseries still sell invasive plants as there are few laws to regulate their sale.
- The [Canadian Coalition for Invasive Plant Regulation \(CCIPR\)](#) was founded as a result of an outcry from the public to stop the sale of invasive plants.



Let's stop the sales of high risk invasive plants in nurseries. Check these [lists of invasive plants](#).

### You Can Help

- Know which plants are invasive: [Credit Valley Conservation Invasive Plant List](#) (2021).
- Remove invasive plants from your property.
- Speak up (respectfully) when you see invasive plants for sale.
- Become a [CCIPR supporter](#)!



## WHO STAYS WHEN WE LEAVE THE LEAVES?

By Pam MacDonald, Halton Master Gardener



Over 60% of our native bees are ground-nesting. This one, the Polyester Bee (*Colletes* spp.) pollinates the flowers of Red Maple, Willow, and Apple trees. The female lays a single egg in the nest she digs into the soil. Fallen leaves are essential protection from the elements and predators such as skunks and raccoons.

'**Leave the leaves**' is a mantra for ecological gardeners and is becoming a common refrain throughout the gardening world. Why? Because leaves are Mother Nature's insulator and a slow feed system for soil, helping to keep moisture in place, and nourishing soil as they break down; and, because fallen leaves are nurseries – winter shelter for many organisms that benefit our gardens. Once established, successive generations can provide their services again and again when we leave the leaves, this and every autumn. Here are a few of the countless pollinators, decomposers and biological controls of pest insects that will live out one or more stages of their lifecycles in leaves.

Most millipedes, like this colorful black-and-gold Flat Millipede, (*Apheloria virginensis*), feed primarily on decaying leaves, helping to recycle nutrients into the soil.



Millipede

Image: [iNaturalist](#)



Cellophane Bee

Image: [Sharp-Eatman Nature Photography](#)

Ladybugs, especially in their larval stage, consume aphids as well as scale insects and other garden pests. They hibernate as adults in leaf litter, emerging over a period of weeks in spring. The slow emergence of ladybugs and other beneficial leaf dwellers is a reason to delay or forego cleaning up leaves in the spring as well as in autumn.



Ladybug

Image: Canva

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## WHO STAYS WHEN WE LEAVE THE LEAVES? (CONT'D)

The Mourning Cloak Butterfly (below) overwinters in leaf litter in the adult stage, emerging in spring to mate, while the Eastern Tiger Swallowtail Butterfly requires leaf litter over the winter to pupate, emerging as an adult in May or as late as June.



Mourning Cloak  
Butterfly

Image: Canva

Fireflies, which are actually beetles, live about 95% of their lives as larvae in leaf litter, under rotting logs, and in other moist areas where they can thrive. The larvae devour many soft-bodied insects including slugs and snails. As adults, they put on an enchanting light show on hot summer evenings.



Firefly  
(actually a beetle,  
not a fly!)

Image: Canva

Sphinx moths, like this Hummingbird Clearwing, are highly effective daytime pollinators. They are unusual in that most moths are nighttime pollinators. The Hummingbird Clearwing overwinters in leaf litter as a pupa.



Hummingbird  
Clearwing Moth

Image: Michael Nerrie  
(Flicker)



Yellow Garden  
Spider

Image: [Grow Veg](#)

Spiders, like this Common Yellow Garden Spider, trap prey in webs and hunt in leaves, grabbing insects that come within range. Many are nocturnal hunters, using leaf litter as shelter during the day. In winter most spiders go dormant, hunkering down under leaf litter.



Green  
Lacewing

Image: Canva

Green Lacewings consume pests such as aphids and cutworms. The larvae overwinter in cocoons attached to leaves that drop to the ground in fall, where they remain protected in the leaf litter. Lacewings can also overwinter as adults in the leaf litter.

To protect the food and habitat of all these valuable invertebrates and pollinators, please,

### ***'Leave the Leaves'!***

- Rake leaves into garden beds to add nutrients to the soil, insulate plants, provide moisture and suppress weeds.
- Mow over light layers of leaves on turf to chop them into small pieces. They will drop between blades of grass adding organic matter to the soil.

### **Learn More Here:**

- [Leave the Leaves: These Insects Depend On It](#) - Xerces Society
- [Leave the Leaves & Plant Debris](#) - Joe Gardener (YouTube)
- [How to Re-Use Fallen Leaves at Home](#)





By Hariette Henry, Halton Master Gardener

Your plant looks lovely and healthy and it appears you've provided it with excellent care. People often discard their Poinsettias, *Euphorbia pulcherrina* after the holidays, but it is possible to [keep these Mexican natives in good condition and enjoy them for several years](#). I notice that you mention the red leaves. These are actually called bracts and the tiny yellow flowers in the centre are called cyathia.



Image: Linda Arndt

No doubt your Poinsettia received plenty of sunlight and water in the winter months. In spite of this, in spring many plants will lose leaves and most of their colourful bracts. At this point watering should be limited to only when the soil is dry which will cause the plant to go dormant. It is recommended to store the dormant plant in a cool, dark location, watering only enough to prevent the stems from shriveling. Once new growth begins again, usually in early May, cut the plant to within 4 to 6 inches of the soil and place in a sunny window. Water and fertilize like any other house plant.

In June, the plant should be moved to a partly shaded location outside as you continue to water and fertilize regularly. In July, pinch back the plant again to control its height and promote fullness. Toward the end of August/early September, bring the plant indoors to a sunny window.

Poinsettias are what horticulturalists call "short-day plants". [This means that to produce flowers](#), they must experience days with less than 12 hours of daylight. Some suggest that most varieties require 10 weeks of short days, while others suggest 8 weeks and some even say as little as 3 weeks.

*What should I do to stimulate red leaf production in my poinsettia. Also, any advice on making sure I don't bring pests indoors when I bring my plant inside.*

To initiate short days, keep the plant in complete darkness from 5:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m. Placing the plant in a dark closet with a towel covering the gap at the foot of the door or covering the plant with a light-proof cardboard box will accomplish the task. Any light received during the dark period can delay flowering.

During the day, the plant still needs light for growth. Place it in a sunny location from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., and continue to water as needed.

Fertilize every week according to the fertilizer label. Once colour is visible, it is no longer necessary to keep the Poinsettia in complete darkness during the night.

The following [are steps you can take](#) to ensure your Poinsettia will enter your home pest and disease free:

- First, inspect the pot and the plant for any obvious signs of trouble.
- Wash the plant with a spray of water or a commercial insecticidal soap. (Some plants are sensitive to soap sprays, so test a leaf if you are not sure).
- Lift the plant out of the pot to examine the roots for pest activity in the soil. If bugs are present, rinse roots and/or soak in an insecticidal soap solution for 15-20 minutes. The soap will kill any bugs that are on the plant and in the soil.
- If reusing the pot, wash it thoroughly in a 10% bleach/water solution.
- Use new sterile soil appropriate for your plant species.
- Finally, water well and bring the plant inside.





# Garden Inspiration!

## Seeds of Wonder - Nature's Tiny Marvels



*Asclepias syriaca*,  
Common Milkweed  
Kath T.



*Lomelosia stellata*, or  
*Scabiosa stellata*  
Carolyn V.



*Echinacea purpurea*, Purple  
Coneflower on a pumpkin lid.  
Pam M.



*Antirrhinum majus*,  
Snapdragon  
Christina B.



*Eutrochium maculatum*,  
Spotted Joe Pye Weed  
Allyn W.



*Paeonia suffruticosa*,  
Tree Peony  
Janet P.



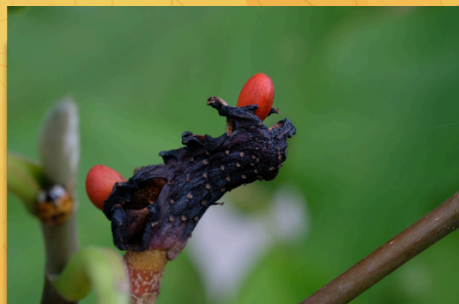
*Monarda fistulosa*,  
Wild Bergamont  
Patty K.



*Solidago caesia*,  
Bluestemmed Goldenrod  
Halette H.



*Verbena simplex*,  
Narrowleaf Vervain  
Carley P.



*Magnolia acuminata*,  
Cucumber Magnolia  
Cathy K.



*Clematis virginiana*,  
Virgin's Bower  
Janet M.



# What's Growing On?

By Trish Moraghan, Halton Master Gardener

Videos and Seed Saver Tool

[Learn more here](#)

Resources for Growing Gardeners

Videos, websites and activities for learning all seasons of the year

[Learn more here](#)

Environmental workshops, hands on activities and resources for Grades K to 12 educators

[Learn more here](#)

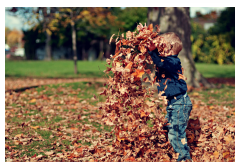
[Learn more here](#)



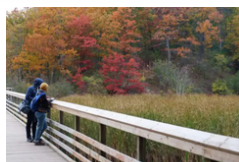
# What's Growing On?



Royal  
Botanical  
Gardens



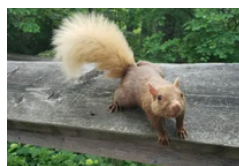
[Oaks and Acorns](#)



[Hendrie Valley](#)



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[Impact Feeding Wildlife](#)



Answering your  
Gardening  
Questions!

Halton Region Master Gardeners

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## MILKWEED: The Ultimate Sanctuary

Visit a wildlife sanctuary and there's a good chance you will spot milkweed. This native plant is like its own tiny wildlife sanctuary. The flowers provide a safe place for small animals to seek food, water, and shelter. Some animals can only find the food they need on milkweed. The next time you're around some milkweed, take a closer look and see which of these creatures you can find.

**Monarch Butterfly**  
Monarch butterfly caterpillars only eat milkweed leaves. Although the plant is poisonous to most creatures, these caterpillars aren't harmed by the poison and will store it in their bodies. Predators who are foolish enough to try to eat one of these caterpillars will get sick and will probably leave the other monarch caterpillars alone.

**Bumblebees**  
The bumblebee is one of few insects big and strong enough to carry milkweed pollen. The plant makes a lot of sweet nectar in return for the bee's hard work. Look carefully at the bumblebees you see on the flowers. Do they all look the same? Probably not—there are at least seven different species that can be found just in and around Boston!

**Eastern Milkweed Bugs**  
This insect has a mouth that looks and works like a long straw. Poking its mouth into a milkweed seed, the bug slurps up the liquid like a milkweed-flavored milkshake. Look for these bugs on the milkweed's seed pods in late summer.

**Crab Spiders**  
These spiders, which look like crabs, can change color to match the part of the flower they're using as a hiding place. This comes in handy when hunting for bees, their meal of choice.

**Red Milkweed Beetles**  
These funny-looking beetles grow up underground eating milkweed roots. Once they become adults, they come up out of the ground and eat the plant's leaves and flowers. If you carefully pick up a milkweed beetle and hold it to your ear, you'll hear it make a soft, mechanical squeaking sound. It makes this sound when it's upset, so put the little bug back gently!

**Ready, Set, Go Outside!**  
Go to [massaudubon.org/go](https://massaudubon.org/go) and download our Milkweed Sanctuary Checklist. See how many species you can find!

Mass Audubon

[Mass Audubon](#)

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[Learn more here](#)

Check our [calendar](#)  
for events



### About Our Newsletter

Cross Pollination is published monthly from February to December and is written and prepared by our dedicated volunteers. Halton Master Gardeners are experienced gardeners who have studied horticulture extensively and continue to upgrade their skills through technical training. We strive to provide science-based, sustainable gardening information to the general public. The information in our newsletter has been verified by our volunteers to the best of our abilities, but given the scope of horticulture and science some concepts may not reflect current knowledge. The content displayed in our newsletter is the intellectual property of Halton Region Master Gardeners and their authors. It can be shared in its entirety, but specific content should not be reused, republished or reprinted without the author's consent.

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