

"Bour-tree, bour-tree: crooked rong
 Never straight and never strong;
 Ever bush and never tree
 Since our Lord was nailed on thee"
 - Scottish Ballad

Plant names, like Scottish ballads, may be obvious or obscure. Most floral epithets do give some insight into the appearance, habitat, history, or usefulness of the particular plant. While some names are easy - blue bead lily and tall white aster are equally uninspired, though descriptive - others are more difficult to interpret. Similarly, plant scientific names may be easily understood or downright complex. *Populus grandidentata* is one example of the former; it is not hard to guess that this is largetooth poplar¹. But every once in awhile, you'll meet a plant with neither an easily deciphered common nor scientific name. I'd put elder (*Sambucus* spp.) into this category.

The name "elder" is believed to have been derived from the Anglo-Saxon aeld or ellaern, meaning fire. This stems from the once-common practice of using hollowed-out elder branches as bellows for blowing fires. *Sambucus* also has its roots in hollow elder branches and the ancient Greek "sambuke", a musical instrument which was made from these branches. Today, the Italian instrument "sompogna" is made from elder wood.

Elder is a plant of contradictions: the flowers smell sweet, the leaves awful; once highly prized and valued (Hale's Compleat Body of Husbandry, 1756), it has been considered useless and a nuisance in recent years; it is sometimes classed as a tree, sometimes a shrub; mature elder wood is very strong while that of young branches is made mostly of very soft pith. Its history is long and varied.

There can be no doubt that elder is a versatile and useful plant. The Roman writer Pliny (A.D. 23 - 79) tells us that elder was used for medicines and hair dyes as well as flutes and pipes (although he recommends using only those growing out of the range of a cock's crow for musical instruments). Anatomie of the Elder, written in 1644 prescribes various parts of the elder for over 70 ailments, including blindness. During this time "elder" and "alder" were used interchangeably; descriptions of the plant confirm that it was *Sambucus* rather than *Alnus*. Folklore says that elder was both one of the woods of the Cross - as mentioned in the above Scottish ballad ("bour" means pipe) - and the tree from which Judas hanged himself. The mythology associated with elder is extensive. Throughout the centuries, elder has been used for more than any other plant of the temperate zone: medicines, cosmetics, watchmaking, microscopy, dyes, insect repellent, food and drink have been associated with various parts of this plant.

On Prince Edward Island, we have two species of the genus *Sambucus*: *S. canadensis* (common elder) and *S. racemosa* subspecies