



Elder Lookalikes

Elderflowers offer delicious opportunities of making fritters and cordial as well as having medicinal qualities. At a quick glance though they can look similar to other heads of white flowers growing on plants and trees in similar habitats. As some of these lookalikes are toxic or highly poisonous, it's really worth taking a closer look to be confident on the differences.

The Plants we take a quick look at in this short film:

Here are the plants we compare in this film. This is not exhaustive though, but includes those that have similar clusters of small white flowers, are most common and that are flowering at a similar time to Elderflower (in the UK). It is helpful to get to know plants and trees in their wholeness - not just the flowers, but also the leaves, bark, growth pattern etc.

- Elder *Sambucus nigra*
- Rowan *Sorbus aucuparia*
- Wayfaring Tree *Viburnum lantana*
- Guelder Rose *Viburnum opulus*
- Privet *Ligustrum vulgare*
- Umbellifer Family *Apiaceae* or *Umbelliferae*

Elder

- Shrub or small tree
- Less uniform than some of its lookalikes - like fluffy clouds of white flowers sitting on these little green stalks of varying lengths
- Looking at an individual flower you'll notice they have 5 petals and 5 stamens which are long that are quite distinct with golden anthers - the parts with the pollen on
- The overall look of the flowers are creamy white and they smell distinctly of elderflower
- The leaves have pairs of leaflets going up the stem with one at the end. The stems have a groove near the base of them. Stems grow out of branches in opposite pairs. Leaves have subtle serrated edges and are also medicinal.
- The bark on older parts of the tree is deeply grooved, like crinkled cork. The newer growth's bark is purplish grey with little dots on them. The first year growth of stalks is a bright, vibrant green.

Rowan

- Fluffier clouds of flowers
- More plentiful, finer stamens. Flowers do not smell of elderflower.

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- Leaves can look similar as they also have pairs of leaflets going up the stem with one at the end, however there are more of them on a stem.
- Also a tree however, usually a bigger tree than Elder

Wayfaring Tree

- Also has clusters of small white flowers with 5 petals and 5 distinct anthers
- Leaves are clearly different from Elder, being much broader, more leathery to feel and silvery hairs underneath
- Also has medicinal qualities

Guelder Rose

- From a distance can look really similar to Elder
- Also have clusters of white flowers but these are distinct as they have a perimeter of larger white flowers surrounding the smaller white ones clustered within. Interestingly, these bigger flowers are not actually fertile but thought to attract insects to pollinate the smaller ones.
- Leaves are significantly different in shape to Elder, being more sycamore-like in shape.
- Bark is also medicinal.

Privet

- Clusters of small white flowers, these naturally grow in more of a spike formation than a cloud or umbrella shape.
- Individual flowers have four petals and just two stamens
- Leaves are glossy and thicker
- Garden privet is common in hedging
- In the Autumn, they have black berries as do Elder

Umbellifers

This is a family of plants to get to know as it contains some of our most poisonous, deadly plants.

- Most distinctive difference between this family and Elder is that they are plants growing up from the ground rather than a shrub or small tree with woody trunk and branches.
- Grow mainly in hedges and ditches
- They do however have clusters of white flowers and we have known people to gather them thinking they were gathering Elderflowers
- This family has a clear succession through the year of the species flowering one after another. The umbellifer most likely flowering at the same time as Elder is Cow Parsley that is not poisonous. Cow Parsley leaves however are difficult to tell apart from Deadly Hemlock.
- A distinguishing feature of this family is the uniform geometric pattern of the flower heads with one straight stem separating into many other straight stems. As this family has a mini umbel on at the end of each umbel they are called compound umbels.

Invisible Learning

- Good foraging practice of getting to know the botanical features of the plant or tree one is foraging as well as that of its lookalikes.
- Having poisonous lookalikes provides great motivation to really look and get to know plants in finer detail.
- Development of pattern recognition

Risk Assessment Considerations

These are the risk assessment consideration documents to be referred to for this activity.

- Plant based activities
- Site risk assessment (specific to your site)

Links

- Foraging, Elderflower Cordial, other Elder delights

Tags

- Foraging, Lookalikes, Plants, Medicine, Spring, Summer, May, June

