

# The Elder Mother

*The native White Elderberry, cousin of Europe's Black Elderberry, is now a rare plant along the Merri Creek. A new project aims to secure the local plant's future.*



1 The Elderberry holds a rich folklore - alternatively regarded as protection against witches, or a focus for covens. In English and Scandinavian traditions the plant is protected by the 'Elder Mother.' Her permission was needed before cutting wood from the tree. Harry Potter fans know the 'Deathstick', a powerful wand, was made from Elder wood. This folklore relates to the European Black Elderberry, *Sambucus nigra*, sometimes grown in gardens for its edible flowers and berries and occasionally escaping as a minor environmental weed on the Merri Creek. However the native White Elderberry, *Sambucus gaudichaudiana*, occurs naturally on the Merri and a new focus for conservation efforts.

The White Elderberry is a soft-wooded shrub a few metres tall, growing from a long-lived rootstock. The branches are replaced annually. Sprays of scented flowers are followed by yellowish berries among the bright green, divided leaves. White Elderberry is widespread in Australia in damp, sheltered areas and is common in the Dandenongs and Otways. In drier landscapes to the north and west of Melbourne, it is restricted to moist microhabitats and

on the Merri it occurs where escarpments block hot north winds and harsh western sun, where subsoil moisture is constant and the creek cools and humidifies the air.

The berries are attractive to birds that disperse the plant's seed. The berries were also a food plant for aboriginal people. Most Elderberry species are found in the northern hemisphere with only two Australian species.

MCMC has protected the habitat of two plants near Merri Creek in Craigieburn over many years, the only plants that MCMC had recorded. In 2009 a vegetation study reported a second small population in Epping, a few kilometres downstream of the Craigieburn plants. The plant's rarity on the Merri probably reflects its naturally restricted habitat, but it is also likely that populations have been lost. Merri escarpments have often been buried under soil during levelling of adjoining developments and dumping of rubbish has smothered vegetation. MCMC staff had to remove a large dump of household waste that threatened the mature plants in Craigieburn. Weed competition is another threat, especially by Blackberry and other moisture-loving weeds.

When plants become so rare and restricted, local extinction may result from chance events and fertility problems. In 2016, MCMC staff members were shocked to discover that one of the Craigieburn plants had mistakenly been cut and painted with herbicide by an unknown person. In response we designed a project to avoid local extinction of White Elderberry.

In May, Melbourne Water provided funds to begin securing this species on the Merri. Our first task was to propagate cuttings and seed from all known remaining plants to provide plants for re-introductions. These could be insurance in the event of disaster at the remnant sites. We also needed to identify any risks to the remnant sites and collect information on the habitat requirements for the future plantings.



3 In May, Victorian [Indigenous Nurseries Cooperative](#) and MCMC collected cuttings from the lonely but still healthy, Craigieburn plant before visiting the Epping site where plants were reported eight-years ago.

The Epping site is a dramatic creek landscape. The Merri twists and turns between huge mossy boulders tufted with Woolly Tea Tree and orange sedges. Rock Correas, ferns and wildflowers poke from crevices in basalt columns overhead. Even the dumped rubbish provides a fascinating archaeology of mid-twentieth century farming life. Whittlesea Council and Melbourne Water have done a great job removing the choking weeds that once obscured this gem of a site.



**Photos :** 1. The pearl-like flowers of White Elderberry, sweetly scented and attractive to insects; 2. The yellowish berries of White Elderberry; 3. Naomie Sunner collects precious cuttings from the lone Craigieburn plant; 4 Naomie uses an extensible pruner for difficult to reach cuttings.



Most excitingly, the Elderberry plants were still there! Nine healthy plants, scattered along a fifty-metre stretch provided ample cutting material and could be the core of a viable reintroduction program. This initial project aims to produce forty plants for planting into prepared sites, similar to remnant sites. MCMC will also conduct identification training for other agencies involved in creek management to alert staff to the presence of White Elderberry and other uncommon native plants with a 'weedy' appearance.



*Above: Leaf cuttings, stem cuttings and even a few berries were collected for propagation. Now, we wait!*

Eventually, MCMC hopes to establish several populations of White Elderberry, including plants from around Melbourne to widen the genetic diversity. Management actions needed to promote natural regeneration will be identified. White Elderberries may prove useful in beautifying sheltered and damp niches that are common in urban revegetation sites and prone to weed invasion. Hopefully, the Elder Mother will be pleased with our efforts.



*Above: Ferns and other shade loving plants share the Elderberry's microhabitat.*



*Left: A tall basalt column shelters an Elderberry in Epping.*