

Elderflower Harvest Basics

From Tony DiMaggio

I am outfitted to haul a truck and trailer load of flowers anywhere 4 hours or less away from my farm in Mondovi, WI. I expect to participate in the harvest wherever we do it. - An alternative (which would be much easier for me) is that you bring the flowers to my farm. I think if flowers are windblown or squished together on the freeway for hours they are going to lose substantial quality.

Harvest should start as soon as dew is TOTALLY off the flowers and preferably be staffed sufficiently to only take a few hours or less. Rough numbers here - I think a couple of focused workers could harvest 480 pounds flowers / fresh in three hours under ideal, first pass, harvest the whole plant conditions. My experience last year harvesting under not very great conditions were about 1/10th that.

Under ideal conditions flower will dry in 3 days and because my dryer is largely solar powered cost very little in energy, but in grey wet weather longer and the energy cost is substantial.

FOR FIELD MAINTENANCE FLOWER HARVESTING

A grower will want to use a cabinet style drier with racks. Racks will probably be made out of wooden frames with fiberglass mosquito netting and galvanized chicken wire or hardware netting for support. I would use a solar heating with a standard electric heater for nights / backup.

The basics of good drying: Drying elderflowers requires special care because they are white, pretty and delicate. Keep heat below a certain temperature (maybe 105 F for elderflowers?). Flowers must be totally dry when harvested. Continuous drying is key. Once the flowers are mostly dry, they should not be permitted to reabsorb moisture from a new addition of wet material into the drier or on a cool wet night. The early stage of drying requires a lot of new air and temperature is less important. The end stage of drying requires hotter air, but less of it. In Oregon a lot of the flower drying (calendula, chamomile) is done in blacked out greenhouses. I don't think that this is a good solution for us because of loss of quality.

Yields / Drying Space / dry down rate: I didn't track the data. Maybe something like 7 lb dry to 100 sq feet of drying space over 4 days. I have a resource that says the dry down rate is 6:1, but I am not sure how they figure for stems, which is a huge factor.

University of VT guide on growing elderberry found on the MEC website. p. 48

“Flowers can be removed from the stems prior to drying by rubbing them over a screen. Alternatively, the Le Sureau du Canada publication recommends drying flowers on the stems individually in paper bags at 80.6°F for 48 hours. At higher temperatures, the flowers may brown or caramelize which can negatively affect their flavor, appearance and medicinal properties. The conversion ratio of fresh elderflower on-stem to destemmed, dried elderflower is 20:1. Therefore, 20 pounds of florets on-stem should yield one pound of dried florets (Quebec, 2010; Carpenter and Carpenter, 2015).”