



**MIDWEST  
ELDERBERRY  
COOPERATIVE**

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

## **Midwest Means National when it's Elderberry**

Trade shows work! Midwest Elderberry Cooperative (MEC) has attended EXPO West and both the Winter and Summer Fancy Food Shows for a number of years. As a result, demand for elderberry and flower ingredients now greatly exceeds supply. Due to very limited capital resources, MEC will shift budget priority away from attending national trade shows towards greatly growing production and expanding crop harvest / processing capabilities.

**Not all elderberries are alike - especially when it comes to taste!** A growing number of food and beverage companies have begun to explore how to incorporate native elderberry's sweet neutral flavor potential in their product lines. Elderberry packs a lot of purple power into tiny berries that still require hand-harvest and packing. Their antioxidant rich and nutritionally dense flavor profile invites numerous food and beverage ingredient possibilities. Consequently, the demand for US grown native (*Sambucus canadensis*) berries has quickly exceeded supply.

But just as demand was taking off, most commercial scale Midwest growers of native elderberry suffered poor 2018 harvests due to an unexpected confluence of multiple weather factors across America's midsection. MEC estimates that it lost over 500,000 lb. of probable sales. Those lost earnings have deprived it of needed capital to hire staff as well as slowing its ability to grow rural-based, decentralized value-added capacity convenient to its commercial grower members. Farmers of this new-old specialty crop have mostly funded their operations from savings and retained earnings with key support from the University of Missouri in particular. They have also benefited from various USDA/SARE programs and assistance from the Missouri and Minnesota Departments of Agriculture as well as University of Minnesota Agroforestry.

### **Opportunity Born of Necessity**

Resourcefulness and persistence are basic requirements for successful farming. From 2006 Terry Durham put "Farmer Grown, Farmer Owned" on his River Hills Harvest (RHH) brand labels. In 2012 Christopher Patton, a 2018 Specialty Food Association Business Leadership

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Award winner, founded MEC in order to make that motto a reality for decades to come. Chris also markets the RHH brand nationally outside of Missouri through a network of regional and national distributors.

With most of River Hills Harvest's inventory of native Elderberries already processed for 2019 production, much depends on this coming fall's harvest to continue growth of the brand. Commercial US native elderberry cultivation began in 1997 when organic farmer and RHH owner Terry Durham met with the University of Missouri horticultural researchers. Their significant progress led to the University of Missouri at Columbia hosting The First International Symposium on Elderberry in June 2013.

Since a poor 2018 harvest left MEC without substantial income, Chris decided it was time for the coop to expand southward beyond the three states near its Minneapolis, MN base. In February 2019 Terry joined MEC and was elected to its Board of Directors. They agreed to begin sourcing all of RHH's elderberries through MEC in order to better coordinate inventory and harvest resources. Terry's grower network will be transitioned into MEC as commercial members, which will shift a portion of the economic demands and returns onto all participating farmers through the coop. Strategically important, this decision will provide RHH with the berries it needs and enable MEC to enter into multi-year purchase contracts with large buyers of berry and flower ingredients. It should accelerate increasing the volume of certified organic berries.

Chris also proposed changes in MEC's by-laws to better fit the needs and nature of its membership. They agreed and voted to free themselves from the **obligation** to grow to commercial scale within three years of joining MEC by removing associated participation in coop profits and losses. These farmers choose to focus on selling elder flowers / berries and/or farm-produced value-added products directly into their local markets. Farmers, who decide to grow elderberry on a commercial scale, buy delivery rights shares related to mutual obligations of crop delivery/purchase between themselves and the coop. They also participate proportionately in the coop's profits and losses from sales of bulk frozen berries and all value-added ingredients made and/or sold by MEC.

**MEC hopes to educate and recruit enough farmers at this year's annual River Hills Harvest Comprehensive Elderberry Workshop (June 13-15) in Jefferson City, MO to reach 2,250 acres of commercial cultivation and harvest by 2025. That represents a potential yield of about 5,000 tons of frozen berries or 10,000,000 lb. - nature permitting, which is about 10% of projected US market potential.**

Growing native *Sambucus canadensis* elderberry commercially is good for the environment and good for the public. This woody perennial preserves and rebuilds the soil. Researchers have noted over 60 native pollinators on elder, and it provides antioxidants at levels higher than some of the more popular "super-fruits". Often used by consumers as a natural antiviral when sick, more recent research has indicated elderberry's great potential as an anti-inflammatory, particularly when it comes to brain inflammation or injury associated with stroke and dementia. Learn more about elder berries and flowers at [midwest-elderberry.coop](http://midwest-elderberry.coop).