

Tennessee Grower Profile:

Jeff DaBell, DaBell Family Farms
Cumberland County – Crossville, Tennessee

Chronicling Specialty Crop Marketing in Tennessee

FOCUS ON ELDERBERRIES

Rachel Painter | Center for Profitable Agriculture



Cumberland County elderberry producer, Jeff DaBell, shares his production and marketing strategies.

TENNESSEE ELDERBERRY MARKET:

According to Census data from the USDA National Agriculture Statistics Service, commercial elderberry production accounted for 790 acres in 2017, with Missouri accounting for approximately half of the national acreage at 369 acres. Ripe elderberries have an appearance of a small blueberry and are moderately juicy with a firm exterior skin and are typically harvested in the July and August in Tennessee. Due to toxicity concerns of fresh berries and rapid degradation of the fresh fruit, a commercial elderberry producer must have the ability to process or sell immediately after harvest. Most elderberries grown commercially in the United States are sold to processors for beverages, jellies, jams, syrups and pies. There is also increasing popularity and market demand for elderberries in the health supplement and tonic industry. With the lack of processing facilities for elderberries and similar fruits in the state, many small-scale elderberry producers in Tennessee market direct to consumers through on-farm stands, you-pick operations, and farmers markets.

Series of grower profiles of selected specialty crops in Tennessee.

- Cut Flowers
- Persimmons
- Blueberries
- Elderberries
- Garlic
- Microgreens

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COMMENTS & OBSERVATIONS FROM THE FARM

"We follow organic practices, but we are not certified."

"These are still young plants, so we are still learning how much yield to expect."

"We personally like elderberries for making syrups and tonics for ourselves. So, we wanted to grow them for others to enjoy as well. We are learning a lot as we go."

"We started farming to ourselves to produce what we like to eat. We have used and purchased them for a long time. We hope to have plenty to sell to customers in the future."



"We sell as whole berries to in small quantities to existing customers that purchase CSA shares and produce from us. We currently don't have enough to advertise that we have them for sale as the demand far outweighs production at this point."

"This is a niche, specialty crop. A lot of people want elderberries for health benefits, yet it is hard to find locally-grown elderberries. Most of the products and dehydrated berries are not grown locally."

"This has sort of been a 'Field of Dreams' crop – if you build it, they will come."

"We are in the early stages of production and the plants should fill in and grow in productivity and profitability over time."





“Due to the low volume that we had to sell, we are currently most successful and profitable with our leafy greens and salad mixes. I believe once we start having more elderberries to offer it will be hard to keep up with demand. There is a higher price point for elderberries than many other crops as the supply of locally-grown elderberries is very minimal.”

“Wildlife control is very important. We have deer eating the berries and will have to add bird netting in the future for the birds.”

“Japanese beetles are the heaviest insect pressure we have. We are addressing that with scouting each morning and handpicking them to reduce damage.”

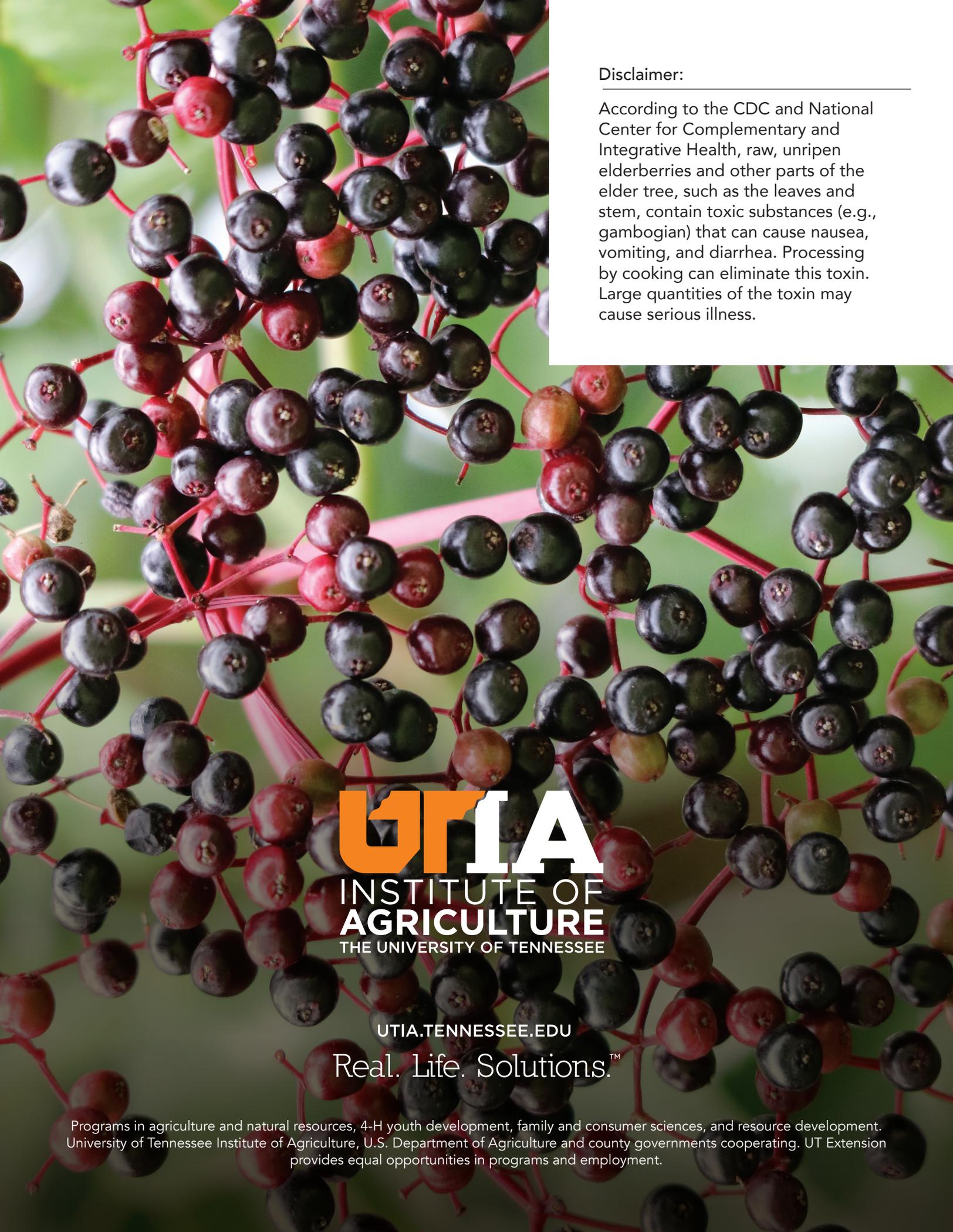
“Plant spacing should be around 6 – 8 feet apart to open up the airflow and give them room to grow. We have learned that lesson as we planted them much too close together at first and had to dig them up and space them apart more.”

“Grow elderberries and any fruit for a few years before trying to market it. This will help get some consistency in your yields and quality so that you can find long-term customers.”

“Learn as much as you can first so that you don’t have to learn the hard way and end up moving plants around like we did. Do your homework and utilize your resources, like UT Extension and the Tennessee Department of Agriculture.”

“There are a lot of niche or specialty crops that are successful in a more progressive or urban crop area, but they don’t work here because of our market. Take your time to establish a relationship with your customers and determine what they are looking for and fill that need.”





Disclaimer:

According to the CDC and National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, raw, unripen elderberries and other parts of the elder tree, such as the leaves and stem, contain toxic substances (e.g., gambogian) that can cause nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. Processing by cooking can eliminate this toxin. Large quantities of the toxin may cause serious illness.

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