

## Elegant Early Spring Elms

by Michael Pollock

Elegant, graceful elms are one of the earliest spring flowers, though reserved. There are three native species here, winged, slippery, and American elms. Their twigs, leaves, and flowers alternate regularly along slender branches, producing a geometric effect. All three have roughly oval, roughly textured leaves with twice serrated edges, like a pruning saw blade, and straight, evenly spaced veins. One characteristic is irregular – the leaf bases are lopsided. They flower around February to March, but probably at slight different times. There are two elms in front of UNC's chemistry labs on South Road, and one is purplish when the other is greenish.

In *A Natural History of Trees*, botanist Donald Culross Peattie wrote of American elms: "If you want to be recalled for something that you do, you will be well advised to do it under an Elm – a great Elm, for such a tree outlives the generations of men; the burning issues of today are the ashes of tomorrow, but a noble Elm is a verity that does not change with time. And though Elms too are mortal, great ones are remembered as long after they are gone as are great men." The largest elm I know of is in front of Carrboro's Town Hall on West Main Street. According to Planning Director Trish McGuire it is an American elm, probably planted when the original school was built, around 1921-1922. I think an American elm is labelled in UNC's Coker Arboretum. There is a large and picturesque elm near the corner of 54 and 55 in Durham.

I am most familiar with winged elms (*Ulmus alata*), easy to identify but less appreciated. They are often one of the first deciduous trees in the succession of plants from field to mature forest, on somewhat dry soil and near streams. In a nearby pinewoods they are common, benefitting when the loblollies were shattered by snow, ice, and a hurricane. In Chapel Hill, they joined cedars in filling pastures that would have been good sledding slopes at the former Meadowmont dairy. They have the smallest leaves of our local elms (1-3"), with short or no leaf stalks (petioles). Their trunks are light brown while their gray twigs often have two pale "wings" of cork, hence the common and scientific names, and resemble only sweetgums. Winged elms can get pretty large, over 60 feet tall and 1-2 feet wide, and can resemble American elms, but are usually smaller. Other names include wahoo and small-leaved elm.

A murmur of early spring is the swelling of flower buds along their thin twigs. The



petal-less flowers can be male, female, or both, and a tree can produce more than one sex. Later the trees become shiny gray, due to the clusters of brown seeds, fringed with hairs, and sort of shaped like flattened skate eggcases from the coast. These are samaras or keys, distributed by the wind. The delicate, deeply etched new growth appears to hang limp, but is actually stiff in that position as it surges out by the day.

Slippery elm leaves are rough on each side and largest, 4-7" long. Their reddish-brown, smooth branches ascend, unlike American elms. The twigs and buds are hairy, unlike the other elms. It is also called red elm and its scientific name is *U. rubra*. Another unique characteristic is the slippery inner bark. When cut, the bark is reddish throughout, while the other two elms have light and dark layers. The reddish flowers produce large, circular, light-colored, and usually hairless seeds. This is the next largest elm here, growing over 70' tall and 3' wide, and living 200 years. Slippery elm seems to prefer more moisture, growing near streams and in bottomlands.

American elms (*U. americana*) are grandest, up to 140' tall and 10' across, and living more than 300 years. They are appreciated for their fountain-like shape when growing in the open. The base can form buttresses and the bark is dark gray. The leaves tend to be

smaller than those of slippery elms, and are hairless or rough on top and usually hairy below. The flowers are green and red and hang on short stalks. The dark brown seeds have hairs around the edge and more of a notch than slippery elm seeds. Self-seeded, they usually grow in moist soil. Other names include white, gray, river, swamp, and water elm.

American elms were more common, but many were killed by Dutch elm disease, caused by two fungi from Asia, first noticed in the US in 1930 and spread by non-native and native bark beetles (so don't transport elm wood) and through root grafts between trees. Slippery and winged elms are less susceptible. Treatments and disease-resistant cultivars have been developed. A more virulent species was noticed in the 70's, but probably arrived in the 40's or 50's, while the earlier kind is declining. The disease becomes less common south, and it is thought that climate change will reduce the risk.

American elm has the most valued elm wood, and it is strong, split-resistant, holds screws, and stands water, though it rots in the ground and warps. It was used in wheel hubs, barrels, agricultural and sports equipment, ships, flooring, paneling, furniture, coffins, boxes, maple syrup collectors, and chopping boards. Slippery elm was used similarly and for sills, posts, and railroad ties. Winged elm was used for table legs, handles, and hockey

sticks. Canoes, ox whips, rope, and paper were made with American elm bark. Cotton bales were prepared with winged elm rope, while slippery elm bark was used for nets, baskets, and roofing.

Slippery elm was valued for culinary and herbal uses. A tea of the inner bark was used for digestive problems, coughing, and pleurisy, and externally on wounds. Osage Indians and Revolutionary War surgeons used bark poultices to treat bullet wounds. The inner bark also yielded nutritious flour and was used to preserve fat. The FDA approved slippery elm as a soothing agent in throat lozenges. American elm bark tea was used for colds, coughs, intestinal problems, menstrual cramps, eye problems, in an herbal treatment for cancer, etc.

Many other species are associated with elms, but maybe elms have just been examined more than most trees. Mistletoe sometimes grows on elms and logs support fungi like the giant elm bracket. In the Old World elm was given to livestock and here deer, rabbits, and beavers chew on American and slippery elm. Bobwhites, Carolina chickadees, finches, yellow-rumped warblers, possums, squirrels, and chipmunks consume seeds. According to the Illinois Wildflowers website, a few aphids, scales, buffalo treehoppers, plant bugs, the elm sawfly, a stinkbug, and walkingsticks live on elms, honeybees visit the flowers, and various long-horned beetle larvae bore in it. There are many leafhoppers, some transmitting deadly elm phloem necrosis.

Elms have a who's who of lepidopterans. Butterflies include question marks, commas, and mourning cloaks. There are large imperial moths, Io moths, Polyphemous moths, Cecropia moths, elm sphinxes, and American daggers and other dagger moths. Next month there will be forest tentworms. Many of the moths at porchlights include elm among their larval foodplants, including porcelain grays, Canadian melanophias, and curved-tooth geometers, all inchworms. The famous pepper-and-salt moth is another inchworm. Others include the laughter, stinging white flannel moths, elm spanworms, white slant-lines, several prominents, and several tussock moths. A seafoam blue and green double-toothed prominent moth caterpillar bites into a leaf and rests there, its jagged back appearing to be the edge. Later they drop the leaves, so predators won't notice the damage.

*Michael Pollock is a freelance writer living in southern Durham and founded Northeast Creek Stream Watch (www.northeastcreek.org). He studied biology and anthropology at UNC.*

## To the Editor:

In reference to your observations on media, yes, being a native-born Washingtonian, I admit to using *The Washington Post* to start fires in our fireplace, LOL. In fairness, I burn its competitors also. None of my adult children buy newspapers, unless they are buying one for me. Same for grandchildren. One child, who shall remain nameless, remembers the large, sometimes sliding pile of newspapers that once terrorized a toddler's existence when visiting dad in his home office. That same offspring, now an adult, has now brokered an arrangement for me to pass unwanted newsprint to line a family friend's cages for a pair of cockatoos.

I'm not going to comment on the range of my wife's attitude. In some ways, she doesn't count. She speed reads and has never really saved newspapers anyway.

I still leave newsclips from various papers on the living or dining room table with the names of the targeted family recipients duly inscribed and circled. Sure, I email articles as well ... it's not the same.

But here's the thing, I have print material in my files Google doesn't, at least not yet. I guess, when they do, I can then use those clips and files for fireplace tinder. At best, it's a race against time. But I don't see how that material will ever burn, given that Google would have to find copies of newspapers that no longer exist, including two I worked for, not to mention now-defunct magazines. I know social critics cite non-existence as a

barometer of quality or relevance; that's a different discussion.

Here's a toast to your newspaper. Thanks for letting me be a contributing writer over a decade ago. I still have those copies; haven't burned them yet, though they too may eventually be used for wrapping fish or lining birdcages. And another toast to one's final curtain call during summer or a mild winter when the lack of need for additional warmth will likely forestall the inevitable striking of the match.

— Khalil Abdullah, writer/editor

*Editor's note:* Khalil Abdullah is my life-long friend, going back to Dorothy Jackson's 8th grade class in 1963.

— Julian Sereno, editor/publisher



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