

*Ulmus procera*

[Synonyms : *Ulmus campestris*, *Ulmus glabra* var. *pubescens*, *Ulmus minor* var. *vulgaris*, *Ulmus surculosa* var. *latifolia*]

**ELM** is a deciduous tree. Of uncertain origin but found in Asia Minor and southern and western Europe, it has red-tinged greenish flowers and leaves that turn deep yellow in Autumn.

It is also known as Common elm, Elem, Elven, Emmal, *Engelsk alm* (Swedish), English elm, European elm, Holm, *Jilm vysoký* (Czech), *Llwyfen Gyffredin* (Welsh), *Olmo* (Spanish), *Orme* (French), Red elm, *Ulme* (German), *Ulm* (Maltese), Warwickshire weed, and Wiltshire weed; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of beauty, charm, courtesy, dignity, graciousness, shade, and stateliness.

Warning – in rare cases the pollen oil can cause dermatitis.

*Procera* is Latin (tall, long) meaning ‘tall’.

The tree’s Anglo-Saxon name was *ulm* or *elm*.

The Romans are said to have fed their cattle on elm leaves and they also planted the trees as vine supports in vineyards.

Both the elm and the ash (*Fraxinus*) play significant parts in Nordic mythology which describes woman, Embla, as having been formed out of the elm tree.

The elm signifies strength in Christian lore.

In England the tree used to play a central role in some of the local May Day celebrations and at Christmas. The maypole was usually an elm trunk collected the day before and painted and garlanded with flowers. While the Yule Log was (preferably for some) a large piece of elm (in the servants’ hall in some houses cider flowed as long as the log burnt).

The elm also had its share of superstition and sayings in rural England. Unseasonably falling leaves signified impending disease amongst cattle. The size of the leaves could be a guide to planting crops such as kidney beans (*Phaseolus vulgaris*) or barley (*Hordeum*). There is a delightful saying for the latter.

When the elm leaf is as big as a mouse’s ear  
Then to sow barley, never fear.

A grim reminder was still familiar at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century  
Every elm has its man.

In the countryside people were used to seeing the elm uprooted in storms or to finding shed branches on the ground.

The tree was referred to in three of the plays written by the English dramatist, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) including *The Comedy of Errors*. In this particular passage Adriana is speaking to her husband’s twin brother

Thou art an elm, my husband, I a vine,  
Whose weakness, married to thy stronger state,  
Makes me with thy strength to communicate:

Authorities believe that an Italian practice of training vines up elm or poplar (*Populus*) trees was not introduced to England. It is thought likely however that knowledge of the practice had reached northern European countries by the 16<sup>th</sup> Century as the association of elm and vine is made by others including John Milton (1608-1674). The latter wrote

.....They led the vine  
To wed her elm; she spoused, about him twines  
Her marriageable arms, and with her brings  
Her dower, the adopted clusters, to adorn  
His barren leaves.

Then the Englishman, Thomas Gray (1716-1771) mentions the elm in his famous poem *Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard*.

Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade  
Where heaves the turf in many a mouldering heap, .....

Its elastic, fairly hard wood was used in ships' rigging and for making wheels, coffins, wagon and cart interiors and for water pipes (before the advent of cast iron). Elm's durability under water was such that it was also sought after for coastal sluices, external agricultural pumps, animal troughs (as well as farm buildings and other farm equipment) and bridge piling (including that originally under Waterloo Bridge in London. The brown to reddish-brown wood was also used in the home for flooring and in roof rafters as an alternative to the more expensive oak (*Quercus*). Today it can still be employed for shipbuilding and for waterwheels, but it is also found in furniture, rifles and tobacco pipes.

After the devastation wrought in Britain (particularly in the 1970s and 1980s) by Dutch Elm disease most of the elms there were lost. This disease (a fungus) first appeared in Europe in 1919 and in the ensuing six years it cut a path through the Continent with the help of the beetle which spreads it – from the Netherlands through Belgium, then France, Germany and Spain. In 1927 when the disease was first identified in Britain the then British Ministry of Agriculture prohibited importation of live elms from the European mainland in an attempt to try and contain the situation. The significant outbreaks in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century changed the landscape dramatically in many parts of the British Isles from that depicted in the well-known paintings of the English artist, John Constable (1776-1837). Scientists continue to work to find a way of countering the fungal disease that sadly is now attacking the elm saplings that have grown to a stage (since the last outbreak) at which they are especially susceptible.

Medicinally, European herbalists recommended use of the dried inner bark for easing gout and halting loss of hair, as well as for the treatment of skin diseases and burns. Bruised leaves were applied to wounds, and a medicinal tea was made from the flowers. Elm was also used in homoeopathic remedies. The galls that can appear on the leaves were often recommended dried for treating chest ailments. Elm is also used in homoeopathic remedies.