

Ulmus rubra

[Synonyms : *Ulmus crispa*, *Ulmus fulva*, *Ulmus heyderi*, *Ulmus pendula*, *Ulmus pubescens*]

SLIPPERY ELM is a deciduous tree. Native to North America (from southern Canada to Florida) it has small orange-tipped, greenish flowers and leaves that turn dull yellow in Autumn.

It is also known as American elm, Cork elm, *Ezho zhide* (Omaha and Ponca North American Indian), Gray elm, Indian elm, It slips ooo-hoosk-ah, *Jilm plavý* (Czech), Moose elm, *Oo-hoosh ah* (North American Indian), *Pe tututupa* (Dakota North American Indian), *Punajalava* (Finnish), Red elm, Red wooded elm, Rock elm, Small elm, Soft elm, Sweet elm, *Taitsako pahat* (Pawnee North American Indian), *Wakidikidik* (Winnebago North American Indian), White elm, and Winged elm; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of patriotism.

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

Rubra is derived from Latin *ruber* (red).

The common name Slippery elm is a description of the feel of the damp inner bark. It is this that is normally dried and powdered both coarsely and finely (and is available commercially destined for invalids and often mixed with malted ingredients) and is the only part of the tree used medicinally now. However because it is in such demand worldwide it is in short supply and producers have resorted to using the coarser outer bark which is not as effective.

In the Missouri River valley in the United States North American Indians ate the bark cooked with buffalo fat. They included the Omaha (particularly their children for whom it was a treat snack) and the Kiowa who are believed to have lived in that region once. Records show that the Omaha Indians certainly thought the bark helped to prevent fat going rancid – and they also viewed it as a flavouring. Many Indian tribes (not least the Kiowa) drank a kind of tea made from the inner bark as a food and the dried bark was also stored for Winter use. Inner bark was also chewed by many of the tribes – and the early lumberjacks – to quench thirst.

Some tribes such as the Menominee, Potawatomi and Omaha wove storage containers and bags from fibre from the trunk bark. An inner bark and buffalo fat mixture was used as a preservative for cordage by the Kiowa tribe who, like some of the Chippewa Indians and the Potawatomi tribe, also used the bark like matting to cover their wigwams. Menominee Indians covered their roofs this way. Other uses the Menominee found for this bark included making snowshoe nets, or fish-nets. Several tribes including the Pawnee, Winnebago, Ponca, Dakota and Omaha used the fibre from the inner bark for making rope and cord. Indian children in the Dakota, Pawnee, Ponca, Winnebago and Omaha tribes all used inner bark wadding for their popguns. One interesting application for this bark which has been attributed to some tribes such as the Dakota was its use in making fire. For this the bark had to be weathered until it was phosphorescent at night – a process that took quite a few years.

This hard and strong wood was burnt as fuel by the Winnebago, Omaha, Pawnee, Dakota and Ponca Indians – and all of them also used it to make pestles and mortars for grinding corn, perfumes or medicine. One other less common end use adopted by the Kiowa that

was reflected in one of their names for the tree – was that of a saddle frame. The dark brown to red wood seems to have been prized by elders of the tribe who for this would throw a buffalo or deer hide over a forked branch. Forked trees provided building posts for several Indian tribes including the Ponca, Winnebago, Omaha, Pawnee and Dakota Indians.

Inner bark was used by many North American Indians including the Winnebago, Kiowa, Dakota, Ponca, Cherokee, Omaha, Pawnee and Menominee as a laxative. On the other hand it was used by the Cherokee for treating dysentery, and they and the Menominee and Kiowa Indians also prescribed it as a treatment for diarrhoea. Meskwaki, Alabama and Iroquois Indians all used slippery elm for problems connected with childbirth and the Iroquois also used it as a stimulant and to cause vomiting when this was required. The Iroquois were known to prescribe it for kidney disorders and blood ailments too. Both Iroquois Indians and some of the Chippewa used the plant for stomach upsets, and the latter valued it as a treatment for venereal diseases. It provided a cold remedy for the Cherokee, and they and the Mohicans used it to ease coughs as well. Lung problems generally were treated with it by the Micmac, Iroquois, Cherokee and Mohican tribes, while the Cherokee, Catawba and Iroquois Indians turned to it as a treatment for tuberculosis. Various throat disorders were eased with it by the Chippewa, Mohican, Potawatomi-, Cherokee and Iroquois tribes, and the latter three also applied it to eye problems. Skin disorders were treated with it by the Meskwaki, Potawatomi and Cherokee tribes, the Cherokee also put it on burns, and it was used for healing wounds by the Menominee, Micmac, some of the Chippewa and the Cherokee Indians tribes.

The wood has been used to make small boats and agricultural implements.

Medicinally, the dried and powdered inner bark has long been used in its coarse form in poultices for healing wounds, boils, burns and skin disorders. While the finely powdered bark provides a nourishing food for convalescents, invalids and young children, and it can be recommended in the treatment of ulcers too. It has also been used in remedies for respiratory disorders, gastritis, enteritis, heart complaints, typhoid fever, dysentery, cystitis, diarrhoea and constipation. It has even been suggested in the past that a pinch of powder in a hollow tooth can allay pain and hinder decay.