

## Wood of The Month



Face grain – American elm



Am Elm, Red Elm, Siberian Elm



End Grain View

### **Ulmus Americana** – American elm

Elm. Almost every city in America has a street named after the popular shade tree; Elm. It was a common sight to have streets lined with elm trees shading the thoroughfares until the Dutch elm disease wiped out much of the elm population. In 1930 the Asian fungus, *Ophiostoma ulmi*, was imported from Europe on logs and quickly spread and began killing hundreds of thousands of trees. The disease is spread by the European elm bark beetles that fly from tree to tree. The elm is a fast growing prolific tree and the young trees continue in the areas affected but also succumb to the disease before reaching full maturity.

The elm has had a long history of use, utility and appreciation including love and conflict even on political levels. One interesting use the Romans began and is still in practice today in Italy, is planting elm trees as a support of the vines in vineyards. Besides being used for fine furniture, elm was used by the Iroquois Indians as a medicine for headaches and early in the game of baseball players would chew a gum of the elm bark which would produce a sticky saliva which they would rub into their gloves to help them catch the ball. Elms are very large trees reaching 100 feet in height and trunks four feet in diameter. There are many ‘elms’ including; *Red elm/Slippery elm, Chinese elm, Siberian elm, English elm, Rock elm, Cedar elm, Dutch elm*, to name a few, but this article will be mostly concerned with American elm, *Ulmus Americana*, also known as white elm, water elm, soft elm, or Florida elm.

The wood of American elm has a grayish white to light brown, thick sapwood and the heartwood is light brown to brown frequently with a reddish tinge and even a gray cast. It is moderately hard with straight or sometimes interlocked-grain and has a unique chatoyance similar to quarter sawn sycamore. The grain pattern of elm resembles the grain pattern of ash. The wood can present some challenges to working or turning in that it can chip out or leave a fuzzy surface. And if you’ve tried to split it for firewood, you know that it does not split easily. That attribute is actually a positive characteristic for elm in that it is hard to split when driving nails or screws, but does require predrilling. It is easily bent and its toughness makes it popular for interior parts of furniture that require good wearing properties. Sharp tools are needed, can dull fast and can be a challenge for hand tools due to the interlocking grain. Elm has been used in

a large variety of uses including cooperage, baskets, ship building, boxes and crates, toys, turning, furniture, flooring, sporting goods and plywood veneer.

Red elm (Slippery elm), *Ulmus rubra*, is a common first cousin to American elm and is sometimes sold along with American elm although it is softer and sometimes called soft elm. It is darker in color with a red to brown shade.

Elm can have a strong offensive odor when green and wet, but has very little odor when dry. Serious allergic reactions are not common, but it can be a “sensitizer” to skin or eyes.

You can read more about Elm at; [Wikipedia](#) or on the [Wood Database](#) and at [Wood magazine](#).

*Written by – Mel Bryan*