

# Kentucky Champion Tree Program

## American Elm

by Diana Olszowy

American elm is a deciduous tree, which before Dutch Elm Disease (DED), commonly grew to 100 feet in height and averaged 3-4 feet in diameter. The species is most easily recognizable by its graceful, arching, vase-shaped growth habit.

American elms are also known as water elms, soft elms, or white elms and are found throughout eastern and central North America, extending as far south as northern Texas and Florida and north to southern Canada. The American elm occurs naturally in an assortment of conditions, most notably on bottomlands and floodplains, and is often found growing with ashes, cottonwood, and sycamore. Elm has a very hard, dense, coarse-grained wood, which makes it difficult to split. It is used for containers, pallets, slack cooperage (baskets and barrels for dry goods) and curved portions of furniture (e.g. bentwood rockers, curved banisters, etc.).

Many types of elm are native to Kentucky, but among the three most predominant elm species – American, slippery and winged – only the winged elm shows resistance to DED. Unfortunately, winged elm lacks the graceful, elegant characteristics of its sibling, the American elm. American elm is a tenacious species, but it is in a fight for its life, and our current reigning champ is no exception. As a survivor of DED, this Lee County resident measures a whopping 18.5 feet in circumference and towers to 107 feet in height. Though it shows signs of decline, this champion still produces copious amounts of seed and continues to do its part to ensure that its species will survive to fight another day.

*Above: The reigning American elm champion tree for Kentucky is found in Lee County. While it is in decline it continues to produce abundant seed.*

*Right: The distance around the Kentucky champion American elm tree is more than 18 feet!*






*Photos courtesy: Diana Olszowy, Kentucky Division of Forestry*

#### **About the Author:**

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# Three Common Kentucky Elms

	American elm	Slippery elm	Winged elm
			
<b>Leaves</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3-6 inches</li> <li>• serrated edges</li> <li>• dull/smooth above and slightly hairy below</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 4-6 inches</li> <li>• doubly-serrated edges</li> <li>• glossy, but sandpapery and very hairy below</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1-3 inches</li> <li>• doubly-serrated edges</li> <li>• dull/smooth above and hairy below</li> </ul>
<b>Twigs/ Buds</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• slender, round, red-brown twigs with terminal buds chestnut-brown</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• rough, hairy, light gray twigs and dark red, hairy buds</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• reddish-brown and zig zagged with corky wings</li> </ul>
<b>Bark</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• fissures layered in cross sections, alternating cream and reddish brown in a scalloped appearance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• fissures layered in cross sections of light and dark brown</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• shallowly fissured with flat, long ridges layered in alternating brown and tan cross sections</li> </ul>
<b>Growth Habit</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• large tree reaching 80 – 100 ft., clear bole and a spreading, vase-shaped crown with dropping branches</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• medium sized tree reaching 60 – 70 ft., tolerant of shade and often a sub-canopy tree</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• reaches 60 ft., common in fencerows and disturbed areas</li> </ul>

Photos courtesy: American and Slippery elms: Paul Wray, Iowa State University, Bugwood.org;  
Winged elm: Joseph LaForest, University of Georgia, Bugwood.org

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