



Chinese Elm (Lacebark Elm), *Ulmus parvifolia*

Alex X. Niemiera, Professor, School of Plant and Environmental Sciences, Virginia Tech

Summary

Foliage: About 1.5 inches long; alternate; deciduous

Height: About 50 feet

Spread: About 50 feet (variable depending on tree shape)

Shape: Varies from a moderately spreading to wide-spreading forms; some forms have pendulous branchlets giving a weeping appearance to the tree

Main Features

Chinese elm is a medium to large fast-growing shade tree. This species is quite tolerant of drought and poor soil; hence, it has been extensively used in urban situations. There are numerous cultivars; cultivar selection criteria include cold hardiness, form, growth rate, foliage characteristics, and bark showiness. Seedling-grown trees will vary in form ranging from a vase-shape to a very wide-spreading form. This species has a relatively showy bark; it is a patchwork of orange, tan, gray, and brown colors and will vary from tree to tree (seedling-grown trees). Fall foliage color is considered fair to nondescript depending on cultivar and location. A major liability of Chinese elm is that it is prone to storm damage (split branches and trunks). Snow and ice loads as well as strong winds can cause major structural damage to a tree. 'Miliken' and Easy Street®, noted by Dr. Michael Dirr in the *Manual of Woody Landscape Plants*, have withstood ice storms and strong winds without damage. One can selectively thin the canopy, remove about 25% of branches, to minimize storm damage.

Plant Needs

Zone: 5 to 9

Light: Full sun

Moisture: Average to somewhat dry

Soil type: Average

pH range: Acid to alkaline

Functions

Chinese elm serves as a medium to large shade tree. This tree is suitable for urban conditions since it tolerates drought and poor soil conditions. It is suitable to serve as a specimen tree (has sufficient characteristics to be featured as a focal point).

Care

Due to its vigor, the species will need to be pruned to develop a proper branch structure. Routine branch thinning is also recommended to reduce the weight load on major trunks/branches which will in turn reduce the potential for storm damage.

Additional Information

The form, showy bark, and tolerance to adverse conditions make this species a very desirable tree for difficult sites. The potential for storm damage somewhat mitigates its usefulness; however, storm damage-resistant cultivars (noted in the main features section; and perhaps others as yet untested) will minimize this shortcoming. A similar species, Siberian elm (*Ulmus pumila*), is also a fast-growing medium to large tree that has leaves that are similar to Chinese elm; however, it is quite weak wooded and prone to several pest problems. Thus, Siberian elm is not recommended for garden or landscape use.

