Florida elm reaches a maximum height of 50 feet with a broad crown of nearly equal spread. When grown in the open, it produces the typical elm outline — vase-like with a crown shaped like an inverted cone. A fast grower when young (20 feet in four years!), the growth rate slows considerably when the tree begins to produce seeds in about its tenth year. This elm forms a trunk one foot in diameter that is covered with grayish bark in vertical ridges and fissures, and buttressed at the base in soft, shallow soils.

Like its frequent and flashier associate, the red maple, Florida elm prefers moist, fertile soil, but will grow in any soil of reasonable moisture and fertility. It tolerates partial shade and temporary flooding, but seems to grow on slightly higher ground than the maples. In general, this elm can be grown anywhere that red maple succeeds. This is especially true in South Florida where the elm doesn’t naturally occur; trees in Palm Beach and Dade counties are doing beautifully. Other frequent associates are laurel oak, sugarberry, sweetgum, black tupelo, loblolly bay, green and pop ashes, hornbeam, and sweetbay.

In my travels in the state, it seems that Florida elm is most common in south-central Florida slough areas. It flowers there in late January in inconspicuous clusters of small green blooms hanging from drooping stalks on bare branches. Fruit development is rapid and the seeds fall in mid-February as the trees leaf out. This elm is especially beautiful after leafing out in spring, forming a mass of bright, clear, clean greenery setting off the mixed green and red of the maples. The flowering and leafing sequence is the same in North Florida but is delayed by a month.

The seeds are rather curious, greenish-brown ovals, a half inch long, containing a central seed surrounded by a papery wing. They have a fringe of short ciliate hairs and a notched tip and can be found in large numbers under the trees at the right time of year. Dispersed by wind and flowing water, the seeds germinate in about ten days. Planted shallowly in seed flats, 90% of the seed will come up, but they are cutworm favorites so take any necessary precautions. Seed retains its viability for over a year if stored under conditions of low humidity and temperature. Elms can also be propagated by leafy cuttings under mist, but seeds remain the easiest way.