

FLORIDA ELM

An Overlooked Native

by Steve Farnsworth

The little-known Florida Elm, *Ulmus americana* var. *floridana*, is one of our best native shade trees, but hasn't been publicized and planted as much as it deserves. A southern form of the American elm, it grows throughout the State in low, moist hammocks and river margins from Lake Okeechobee northward. The American elm, a much larger tree, is found only in the bottomlands around the Apalachicola River in the Panhandle.

A long-lived deciduous tree commonly living 150 years or more, the

YELLOW JESSAMINE

woods to lowlands where water stands only for short periods. It is very noticeable in late winter when blooming in fencerows.

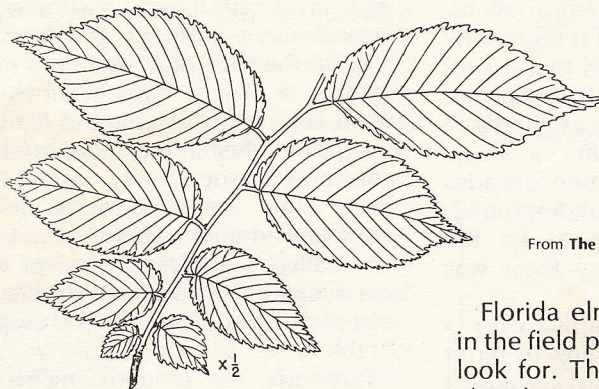
This evergreen vine trails along the ground until it reaches a support. Then it twines its way up, often falling over and twisting upon itself. The opposite leaves are lance-shaped with wide spacing between the pairs on their brown stems. The flowers are about one inch long, yellow and funnel-form, the five lobes of the corolla tube spread apart at the opening. Later the plant bears capsules 1/2 inch to an inch long which contain winged seeds.

Yellow jessamine is poisonous to bees. Like other members of the Loganiaceae, the parts of the plant contain alkaloids. One member of the family is the common source of strychnine. However, bees seem to naturally avoid the plant.

In northern Florida yellow jessamine blooms in late February and early March. It is then we see these garlands of yellow stars on wiry stems lighting the cold winter woods. (In the Orlando area they bloomed in late December this year. -Ed.)

Jan Clark and I are growing it at our nursery, Bullbay Creek Farm, in Tallahassee. So far we have been unable to catch it in fruit, so I do not know about growing it from seeds. We have transplanted it from the areas we have had to clear for our nursery stock. It transplants easily. It is sometimes a bit slow growing, but can tolerate almost any soil, light, or moisture condition as far as our experience has shown. Watkins and Wolfe in **Your Florida Garden** say it can be propagated by seeds, layering, or cuttings.

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.



From *The Native Trees of Florida*, West and Arnold

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.

Florida elms aren't hard to identify in the field provided you know what to look for. The ovate leaves, 2 to 5 inches long, are coarsely toothed and have the typical elm asymmetry: one side of the leaf is bigger than the other with the midvein being the dividing line. Leaf coloring in the fall is unimpressive, with the leaves turning a dull yellow before dropping to reveal the smooth, slender twigs. The lateral twigs are very thin, about 1 to 2 millimeters in diameter, and form delicate patterns that only become apparent after the leaves take their brief vacation.

Dutch elm disease, the great bane of northern cities, is not a problem in Florida, although the Florida elm is susceptible to it. The disease's southern progress has halted in northern Georgia and has never reached this state. Elm bark beetles spread this fungal malady, but they can travel only short distances and may not be present in this state. In any case, the disease seems to rage only where elms form a large portion of the tree population, a condition we'll probably never see here. Otherwise, the tree has no major pest problems.

If you've read this far, you might be considering planting a Florida elm. If so, you'll have to act fast as the short seeding season is nearly upon us and if you miss it, it's "wait until next year", or try to buy one from one of the few nurseries that carry them.