



Cedar Elm leaves and bark photographed at Bentsen State Park.

FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name: *Ulmus crassifolia*

Common Names: Cedar Elm, Olmo

Family: Ulmaceae (Elm)

Large Old Cedar Elms Lend Grandeur

By some incredible oversight, I've failed in almost three years of writing *Rio Delta Wild* to write about a most magnificent tree.

One might best admire the beauty of this tree, the Cedar Elm, by visiting Anzalduas Park.

We're approaching the best time to plant trees in this area: mid-February.

Forget the notion that Arbor Day falls in May. We are, after all, living in a rather different climate than the rest of the U.S.A.

Every valley town could use more trees. It's time to ponder where you might plant one or to which school you might donate funds to buy one.

Many local schoolyards and other public and private places are almost without shade. Trees are a big deal to many people.

Other things being equal, a big consideration of where my daughter would attend elementary school was a shaded playground. Large trees were a big factor in selecting the house we bought. I most often shop at places where shaded parking is available. I'm not alone in this preference. Shaded parking is prime territory when temperatures soar.

Cedar Elm is an excellent choice for growing a bit of shade. It is tough and adaptable. Leaves are small, rough and glossy green in spring. Cedar Elm can withstand heavy, poorly drained clay soils and soils that are moderately compacted. It has very high heat tolerance, medium low water requirements and is alkaline adaptable. Cedar Elm is somewhat less susceptible than other elm species to Dutch elm disease.

Other common names for this attractive tree are: Basket Elm, Red Elm and Southern Rock Elm.

Bill MacWhorter is a local authority on Cedar Elm. He's frequently engaged in measuring candidate Champion Trees throughout the valley and checking the status of established *Texas Big Trees*. Bill points out that many of our largest Cedar Elms are threatened these days. They grow in the former floodplain of the Rio Grande.

Cedar Elm is resistant to drought, but long-term water deprivation of extended drought or cessation in annual flooding is difficult to endure. Many of our largest Cedar Elms, which Bill so admired in his youth, appear to be dying.

Because the International Boundary Water Commission (IBWC) has jurisdiction along local waterways, Cedar Elms which grow in these areas may fall to the IBWC bulldozer. In at least one notable case, IBWC bulldozers destroyed Cedar Elms 75' high and 80 yrs. old on private land where IBWC had no legal right to tread. Floodway easement legalities are sometimes ignored when landowners are not vigilant or present. Legal issues over water and waterways are far from resolution and law enforcement is no easy task.

I listened recently to an old lady's account of rocking beneath the shade of a particular old tree, shotgun astride her lap. She was protecting a tree which had been slated for removal for roadway widening. She had failed, in repeated previous and more diplomatic attempts, to persuade authorities to alter the roadway's course. Moving the roadbed by 12 feet (err was required to preserve the grand old tree. Her shotgun and rocking chair technique was successful and she lived to recount the episode on tape. Sometimes good sense actually prevails in the world.

Cedar Elm may be the most widespread elm species in Texas. It is native to the lower Mississippi Valley southwestward to northeastern Mexico. It is most frequently encountered in hardwood forests, mostly on the coastal plain and near large rivers.

Other Texas native elm species flower in spring, while Cedar Elm flowers in autumn. It may contribute somewhat to fall allergies. The tiny flowers and small "samara" fruit go unnoticed by most of us. Propagation of Cedar Elm is from seed, which germinates in spring.

Some references describe Cedar Elm branches as having "two opposite corky wings." Some Cedar Elms have these. Other Cedar Elms lack the corky wings altogether.

Another Elm species native to Texas and similar in appearance to Cedar Elm is the Winged Elm, *Ulmus alata*, which blooms in spring. This species is sold in the valley, despite the fact that it is poorly adapted for local conditions. During dry seasons, *Ulmus alata* looks like something approaching death's door. It is likely that valley soils are not the best for the Winged Elm, which grows quite splendidly in places like Dallas.

The largest Cedar Elms I've seen are those at Anzalduas Park. Their grandeur is heightened by layers of Spanish Moss, which lends an air of Southern aristocracy.

Los Olmos and Olmito received their name from the Cedar Elms which grow there, and Cedar Elms may also be seen along the Arroyo Colorado.

Cedar Elms are difficult to find at local nurseries, especially those of LRGV provenance, propagated with seed from Cedar Elm native to this area. The quest to find trees of local

provenance is well worth the extra effort, as years of environmental extremes have resulted in small but important genetic differences which impact survival and growth.

Another locally-planted elm with similar leaf size is the Chinese Elm, which grows in my front yard. The bark of Chinese Elm is incredibly handsome. It is smooth and attractively mottled in shades of grey and golden brown.

In contrast, Cedar Elm bark is not so noticeable: flat, scaly-ridged and light-brown.

Chinese Elm grows well in this area, perhaps a bit too well. It germinates in every flower bed. Where the roots of our Chinese Elm were cut to repair a sewage line, an entire hedge has arisen. As you might surmise from the name, Chinese Elm is not native to Texas.

Open pollinated hybrids between Chinese Elm, *Ulmus parvifolia*, and Cedar Elm have been recorded.

Cedar Elm is useful to wildlife in many ways. The seed is eaten by several species of birds.

The beautiful Question Mark butterfly lays eggs on Cedar Elm and the larvae consume the leaves.

Another insect, a real pest, consumes Cedar Elm leaves (as well as those of many other plants). This is the Southern Flannel Moth, *Megalopyge opercularis*, which produces the Puss Caterpillar commonly called the "asp." Be on the lookout for this noxious pest as you venture through the woods. Texas Poison Control Center provides this data: "This caterpillar is described by patients and physicians as inflicting intense radiating pain. The intensity of symptoms may be underestimated leading to under-treatment. Adequate treatment protocols have been lacking and those in use are not very successful."

Cedar Elms identified by signage may be seen at Ramsey Park in Harlingen and Valley Nature Center and Frontera Audubon Thicket in Weslaco.

In 1990, the *Texas Big Tree* for Cedar Elm was in Mission, TX, measuring 83 ft. high with 72 ft. canopy spread and 77" trunk circumference. When Bill MacWhorter last observed this tree, it was in decline. Currently, the *Texas Big Tree* Cedar Elm is located in Kendall County, with a trunk circumference of 131" and 73' height.

The current *National Champion* Cedar Elm is 127 ft high with 75 ft. canopy spread and 162' trunk circumference. This tree grows in Shelby County, Tennessee. (*National Register of Big Trees*, American Forest Org., 2003.)

Send your gaze skyward and perhaps you'll see a tree! If you see none, perhaps it's time for planting.



"Spanish Moss grows on Cedar Elm at Anzalduas Park near Mission, TX."

Technical assistance provided by Mike Heep, native plant nurseryman and UTPA Instructor.

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