

ELM TREES IN PLYMOUTH

A GUIDE



A DEVON ELM PROJECT PUBLICATION

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INTRODUCTION

Devon lost over 98% of its mature elm trees in the Dutch Elm Disease epidemic of the 1970's. The fungal pathogen is spread by two species of elm bark beetle, who breed in dead elm bark.

It's an incredibly complicated disease - essentially, the trees produce an immune response when infected, cutting off their own water supply in the process and slowly dying over the course of 1-2 years. The dead trees, now fully colonised by the fungus, become a breeding ground for the beetles, who carry fungal spores on their bodies and infect healthy trees. The beetles have a range of 20+ miles, and specifically seek out trees over a certain height. The whole county is littered with millions of dead and dying hedgerow elms - stunted versions of the iconic tree doomed to die and regenerate over and over again.

Britain lost somewhere between 30 and 100 million mature elm trees in the 1970's, forever changing the nation's landscape.

The presence of 50-100 mature trees across Devon, many of them still unrecorded, as well as recent efforts to plant resistant varieties shows us that there is hope for the future. While a tiny number of trees (less than one in a million) possess resistance to the pathogen, many survive because of geographic isolation - or indeed, pure chance.

KINGS ROAD

Ulmus Laevis



Kings road in Plymouth is home to a pair of giant European White Elms (*Ulmus Laevis*). This variety is a bit of an outlier in that it possesses no innate resistance to Dutch Elm Disease, but the vector beetles who carry the fungus do not generally feed on the bark, due to the high concentration of a substance called alnulin. Both trees, on either end of the road, are recorded in the ancient tree inventory. Unfortunately, when I visited them in 2023, the smaller of the two (pictured on the cover) exhibited a significant degree of defoliation, which could indicate a DED infection.

Laevis are uncommon in the UK - there are an estimated 100 mature trees across the country. Another monumental example can be found in Witheridge cemetery.

What Three Words: crop.tuned.dine & swung.loudly.value

CENTRAL PARK

Ulmus "Sapporo Autumn Gold"



This stunning avenue of mature *Sapporo Autumn Gold* elms in Central Park, Plymouth, is home to a stable population of white letter hairstreak butterflies, who have adapted to feed on this non-native hybrid.

A cross between Siberian Elm (*Ulmus Pumila*) and Japanese Elm (*Ulmus Davidiana*), this variety produces an attractive mature tree, although it is no longer planted as widely as it used to be due to its weak wood which tends to split in heavy storms.

Sapporo Autumn Gold elms were long considered the gold standard for measuring resistance to DED, and they are still regularly planted alongside trees in resistance trials as a control.

ALTON ROAD

Ulmus Hollandica



Another survivor from Plymouth. This tree is almost certainly a so-called 'Dutch Elm' (a hybrid between *Ulmus Minor* and *Ulmus Glabra*).

The surrounding area is absolutely full of dead and dying elms - again indicating that this tree has a high degree of immunity to the pathogen. Elm bark beetles can travel over 20 miles, so it's extremely unlikely that this tree hasn't been targeted by them over the years.

Shockingly, its twin was felled at some point in 2023. Luckily this doesn't seem to have killed it, as it had sprouted new growth when I last visited.

The area just underneath this tree also has quite a few saplings with identical foliage.

What Three Words: decks.chin.dollar

PIKE STREET

Ulmus Daveyi?



I only came across this tree in 2024 when someone messaged the page. I haven't had a chance to visit it yet and take any measurements or pictures of the foliage. Needless to say, this is a huge tree, and another wonderful example of a survivor from Plymouth.

What Three Words: skips.opera.scales

CANDISH STREET

Ulmus Daveyi



This large Davey Elm (a cross between a Wych Elm '*Ulmus Glabra*' and a Cornish Elm '*Ulmus Stricta/Ulmus Minor Stricta*') can be found on Candish Road in Brixton.

Devon has several large Davey Elms, which do appear to have some resistance to Dutch Elm Disease - although this has never been studied. The largest Davey Elm in the country can be found in Ashburton at the River Dart Country Park, measuring an astonishing 5.40 meters in circumference. A wonderful hollow of Davey Elms can also be found in the village of Stokenham.

This one is a little smaller, but still worth noting.

While this tree is visible to the public, it is on private land (in someone's garden), so please be respectful when visiting it.

Another Davey Elm in Plymouth (again on private land and barely visible from the street) can be found on Green Park Road (WhatThreeWords: kept.cargo.goods).

WhatThreeWords: vibes.hedge.then

OLD LAIRA BRIDGE

The area surrounding Old Laira Bridge in Plymouth is one of three places in Devon where, according to data from *Butterfly Conservation*, one can find White Letter Hairstreaks (the other two being Central Park in Plymouth, and Bovey Woods).

Driving through, you can see dozens of windswept, semi-mature elms all over the area.

This part of Devon needs further research - I am convinced that there are several unrecorded mature elm trees here.

Report surviving trees and follow
the Devon Elm Project on Instagram
[@devon.elms](#)

or email
devonelmproject@gmail.com

Buy resistant trees at disease-
resistant-elms.org