Saskatchewan Dutch Elm Disease Association
Fact Sheet #3—Pruning Elms

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When to prune?

The Dutch Elm Disease (DED) Control Regulations, under *The Pest Control Act,* prohibit pruning of any elm from April 1st to August 31st of each year. This annual pruning ban is in effect because the native elm bark beetle that spreads DED is most active during this period. The beetle is attracted to the smell of freshly cut elm wood, particularly during its spring breeding period. Pruning during the ban will actually increase the risk of attracting beetles to your elm tree!

Does the pruning ban apply to Siberian elms?

Yes, the pruning ban applies to all species of elm, although the American elm is most susceptible to DED. It is also the most valuable elm at risk, making up a large percentage of the trees forming our urban boulevards.

Other elms, such as the Siberian elm, rarely become infected. As far as we know, however, they can spread DED if an infested beetle uses them as breeding habitat. So don't prune any elms between April 13th and July 31st of each year.

How does pruning your elms help to prevent DED?

The native elm bark beetle that spreads DED builds galleries and lays eggs in dying elm wood, for example the dying branches on an elm tree. The more breeding material available, the higher the beetle population. The more beetles there are, the more difficult it is to manage this deadly disease. This is one reason that pruning elms is an important strategy in the management of DED. Unlike a healthy elm, a dying elm will be attractive to the beetle as breeding material. Dying branches on an elm increase the chances that a beetle, possibly carrying the DED fungus, will make its way to your tree. Pruning dead and dying branches also makes a tree healthier, and generally less susceptible to insects and disease.

Pruning your elm won't guarantee that it won't get DED, since the beetle also spreads the disease when it feeds on and over-winters in healthy elms. Pruning does make a difference in the fight to preserve our elm trees, by helping to control the beetle population, and making your tree less attractive to the beetle during its breeding period. Pruning will also improve the health and appearance of your elm trees, as well as reducing the chance of property or personal damage from falling limbs.

Special equipment is required to prune mature elms properly.

Who should be pruning?

Whenever possible, you should hire a pruner with the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA) or equivalent certification to prune your trees. Improper cuts can actually weaken your tree, making it more susceptible to insects and disease, including DED. Phone the Saskatchewan Dutch Elm Disease Association (SDEDA) if you need help finding a certified pruner in your area.

How can I tell if an elm has been pruned properly?

One of the most devastating errors of inexperienced pruners is the topping of mature trees. This practice not only looks awful, but it weakens the tree, making it susceptible to sprouting, insects, and disease. In addition, those wounds that do not heal properly will allow water to enter the tree and encourage rot.

Cuts should not be made too close to the trunk or the wound may have trouble healing over.

Leaving stubs on a tree when pruning can be another problem. Stubs left on a tree can start to rot, and the decay can even spread into the trunk. Cuts can also be made too close to the trunk, damaging the tree's protective branch collar. For more pruning tips, request the supplemental information brochures on tree pruning and tree topping provided through the SDEDA or consult a recognized reference book on tree care and pruning. SIAST, through its Regina Campus, offers a tree pruning course that covers the basics of tree care and pruning for the homeowner or tree worker.

Sterilization of tools is essential to prevent the spread of DED.

Anyone pruning an elm tree must sterilize all saws, pruning poles, and other equipment, before going on to prune a different elm. Otherwise if the elm that has been pruned happens to have DED, the sticky DED fungal spores might be transferred on the unsterilized pruning equipment to uninfected elms.

To sterilize your tools use either methal hydrate (gasoline antifreeze) or a 70% concentrate of rubbing alcohol. Both solutions can be easily applied in a spray bottle, and will totally evaporate from the equipment, making the dangerous practice of wiping blades unnecessary . Bleach will also destroy any fungus picked up by your equipment, but wiping is required or rust will form, possibly ruining your blade, chain, or cutting surface.

Where should you dispose of elm wood?

Be sure that any pruned wood is disposed of promptly. The native elm bark beetle will be just as liable to use the cut wood as breeding habitat as if the branch were still on the tree. That is why *The DED Regulations* make it illegal to store, use, or transport elm wood, unless you are taking it to the closest designated elm wood disposal site. According to *The Dutch Elm Disease Regulations* " every municipality shall designate a disposal site where elm trees (or wood) may be taken to be burned or buried..." This site is usually situated at the local landfill, but will vary by municipality. Phone the parks and recreation department of your municipality (or the village/town clerk in smaller centres) to verify the location.

Disposal should be carried out as follows:

- Burn all wood including all of the bark or bury the wood to a minimum depth of 25 centimetres
- Dispose of all wood as quickly as possible.
- Do not use elm wood chips as mulch.

In a rural or northern municipality, you may burn or bury the wood on your own property, however this must be done immediately.

Help prevent DED by hiring a certified pruner to remove dead and dying branches from your elms. Prune your elms, but not during the annual pruning ban and be sure to dispose of all pruned wood promptly. Proper and timely pruning can help preserve Saskatchewan's American elms for future generations.

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