

Puzzled by Elms

An unusual event is happening in our garden at the moment – the Elm trees are producing fruit. We have lived here for 14 years and this has never happened before – presumably the right sort of February does not happen very often, for these trees flower in the very early spring. At this time, their bunches of little red hermaphrodite flowers can be seen on the upper twigs with the aid of binoculars. The flowers are pollinated by wind, and if successful produce fruits, called samaras. They are like little flying saucers but not completely circular - they have slight point on one side and a dent on the opposite side. At the moment we have plenty of opportunity to inspect them as they are all over the lawn, covering the cars, sticking to our shoes and getting transported indoors!



Deep in the catacombs of my memory I thought I'd remembered that English Elms did not produce fruit, so I started investigating to try and find out what these trees could be. My (rather old) Collins field guide to the Trees of Britain and Northern Europe categorically states that "English Elms are confined to England and perhaps SE France, probably introduced in very early times to the Bristol Channel region" and "The Wych Elm is abundant in west and north Wales". Some frustratingly useless web searching revealed that Welsh spinning wheels and longbows are often made of Elm (presumably Wych Elm). It also revealed that Elm taxonomy is a minefield and identification not easy.

I am sure my trees are not Wych Elms, as the leaves (not out yet but I can remember from previous years!) are not big enough and are rather rough and buckled. Also, the trunks are cracked into small square plates, the trees sucker profusely, the young suckers usually have smooth grey bark but sometimes corky and ridged – all this points to English Elm. And the type of Elm tree in our garden is quite common in this area – I am sure they are in the woodlands in Dale – so what I have here is certainly no rarity! I think these are English Elms and my Collins Guide is just plain wrong, however, I am more than ready to be corrected! (Perhaps the Collins Guide author forgot that there were two sides to the Bristol Channel!)

Of course, being Elm trees they succumb periodically to Dutch Elm Disease. We used to lose a couple of the largest trees each year which was handy for firewood (though even when very dry it is reluctant to burn on its own – you have to mix it with pine or oak). However we have not lost one for a number of years and some of the trees are now getting quite big – I feel a big die-off is in the offing.

And, my original memory about English Elms not producing fruit – how does that fit? Well, my memory was wrong – they do produce fruit but they do not produce **fertile** fruit (or only rarely).

Rosemary Royle