

Alternatives to the Weedy Drake Elm



Photo special to the Democrat: The eastern hophornbeam (Ostrya virginiana) is a good alternative to the weedy and invasive Drake elm.

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The Drake elm (sometimes known as Chinese elm or lacebark elm, *Ulmus parvifolia*) is a widely planted tree in our area. Unfortunately, we're now finding that the tree to be invasive. So we need to look at alternatives for this once-popular tree.

Drake elm does have its positive attributes. It is noted for having a graceful rounded canopy of weeping branches adorned with shiny dark green leaves. The bark of the Drake elm is beautiful. It peels and flakes back to form random plates of various shades of green, gray, orange, tan and red. Landscapers and homeowners appreciate the beauty, fast growth, durability and utility of this medium sized tree that generally gets no taller than forty to fifty feet. Thousands of Drake elms have been planted and enjoyed as street trees, as home shade trees, and in parking lots in our city. There are over 350 of them growing on the main campus of FSU alone.

Unfortunately the Drake elm produces a multitude of winged seed in the fall. The seed are capable of sprouting in planting beds, amongst shrubbery, in vacant lots and in native plant communities adjacent to where they are growing. The invasive nature of this attractive tree has been recognized in a number of states. Recently the USDA Forest Service featured the Drake

elm as a “Weed of the Week” on its invasive plants website:

http://www.na.fs.fed.us/fhp/invasive_plants

So, this tree that was once so popular is now becoming somewhat despised because of its ability to cause us a lot of work in removing seedlings. It’s time to consider alternatives for the Drake elm in the local landscape.

There are a number of trees that would be suitable substitutes for the Drake elm. Some of these may not be very common in local nurseries. But your retail nursery can order them from wholesale nurseries.

The American elm (*Ulmus americana*) is a native tree that was once one of the most popular choices for shade and avenue plantings in the eastern U.S. It is a taller growing elm, reaching over seventy feet high with the classic elm vase shape. Sadly many of these trees have died from Dutch elm disease, carried by the elm bark beetle. Fortunately this disease has not been a serious problem in Florida to date though. So the American elm deserves consideration as a replacement for the Drake elm here.

The winged elm (*Ulmus alata*) is a native tree that is usually seen as a small tree, less than fifty feet high. It is fast growing like the Drake elm. The tree has rough bark and corky wing-like growths along the stems and branches. The winged elm is tolerant of urban conditions and will thrive in difficult sites such as parking lot islands. It would be a very good alternative to the Drake elm.

The American hornbeam (*Carpinus caroliniana*) and the Eastern hophornbeam (*Ostrya virginiana*) are native trees that resemble the Drake elm in size. However, they are best suited for sites that have light or partial shade. The American hornbeam has a smooth-barked trunk with muscle-like ripples, seeds that are covered with leaf-like bracts, and elm-like leaves. The Eastern hophornbeam has attractive shaggy bark, seed that are covered in bladder-like husks, and elm-like leaves. These trees deserve to be more widely planted and will make good replacements for Drake elms on lightly shaded sites.

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