

Slippery Elm, *Ulmus rubra* or *Ulmus fulva*, is a tree that is native to the Northeastern United States. This plant evokes childhood memories of Thayers tablets stored in my mother's purse. My mother believed in natural health remedies before they became main stream. She would seek out tiny health food shops in alley ways run by long haired hippies. I was horrified and embarrassed that I was the only child in my classroom with a brown bread sandwich and cherry tomatoes and envied my classmate's lunches with Cheetos and Hostess Cupcakes. My mother would give me a Thayers Slippery Elm tablet to chew on when I had sore throat. I loved the gentle soothing sweet taste and begged for more. In response, she rationed them.

I have not given much thought to Slippery Elm for decades until I noticed the "at risk" listing on the United Plant Savers website. On a woodland walk last year I found a magnificent *Ulmus rubra* in Putney, Vermont. The diameter was almost two feet and the healthy bark was thickly furrowed and reddish brown. Knowing that there are hundreds of *Ulmus americana* near my home, I thought I could find Slippery Elm, too. I cannot find any. Both species die from Dutch Elm disease and I am guessing that there is a fatalistic view with nursery management of *Ulmus rubra*. Why would want to invest time, resources, and energy in planting short-lived trees? For scientific, historic, and aesthetic reasons, efforts at breeding disease resistant elms are focused mainly on the American Elm. From my research endeavor, Slippery Elm is well worth growing as a young tree. Medicine can be harvested readily from saplings. United Plant Savers urges sustainable crop farming of this valuable tree. Older dying trees can be used for firewood. In searching for young trees on the internet, I see that they are scarce and expensive. Hopefully, my relationship with the landowner of the *Ulmus rubra* in Putney will lead me to a source for seeds and seedlings. I have an ideal site to establish a grove of this wonderful tree.

There are some delightful and informative historical references including this *Materia Medica* book from 1845.

The bark of the *ULMUS FULVA* is an article of much importance in the practice of medicine, and particularly in medical surgery. It is in long, nearly flat pieces, from one to two lines in thickness, of a fibrous texture, a tawny color, which is reddish on the inner surface, a peculiar sweetish, not unpleasant odor, and a highly mucilaginous taste when chewed. By grinding, it is reduced to a light grayish fawn-colored powder. It abounds in mucilaginous matter, which it readily imparts to water. The inner bark is used, and is brought to the shops separated from the epidermis. That of the young branches is of a whitish-yellow, fulvous, rather brittle and extremely mucilaginous, and devoid of any sensible astringency; that of the old branches is thicker, of a darker color, slightly mucilaginous, and astringent. It contains fecula, ulmine, and gum; is edible and mild, yet very efficient demulcent, diuretic, pectoral, deobstruent, emollient, &c. It is inodorous, and has a slightly bitter, slimy taste.

The decoction or infusion of this bark has been very usefully employed as a demulcent in affections of the urinary passages, and in some diseases of the alimentary canal. In dysentery, diarrhœa, and cholera infantum, it has proved a very efficient medicine, and is successfully prescribed in these instances.

The internal use of the decoction of this bark has been found very efficacious in lepra vulgaris and in other varieties of cutaneous diseases; but it is seldom found to show its good effects in these complaints before its use has been continued for several months. The more diuresis it produces, the more certain is its beneficial operation.

This bark pulverized has lately been very extensively used, boiled with water or milk in the form of pap, as a light nourishment for children affected with diarrhœa, dysentery, &c

One drachm of the powder boiled with water or milk, and sweetened with sugar, forms a common bowlful of this pap.

When boiled in a small quantity of water, it forms a thick, dark-brown colored decoction, which gelatinizes as it cools; and when evaporated, leaves a brittle, semi-transparent substance, soluble in water, but insoluble in alcohol and ether, to which, however, it imparts a brownish color. The brittle residue, when treated in the same manner as Klaproth treated the gum-like exudation from the *Ulmus nigra*, afforded nearly the same results, and consequently it must be regarded as *ulmin*; but from the effects of some reagents, it is considered a peculiar modification of potassa, which Scheele detected in elm-bark. *Ulmin* is the substance which exudes spontaneously from the tree; it is also found in the Oak, Chestnut, and other trees, and, according to Berzelius, is a constituent of most kinds of bark.

As an external application in the form of poultice, it is an admirable remedy, far exceeding any other known production, for ulcers, tumors, swellings, gunshot wounds, chilblains, burns, cutaneous diseases, erysipelas, felons, old, obstinate ulcers, and scabs. It is also used very advantageously as a wash for sore mouth or thrush.

It quickly and powerfully allays inflammation, promotes resolution, also suppuration, and heals speedily.

The tea has long been known among Indian women as a specific to insure easy parturition. They drank it for about two months previously, and it is now in very general use.

The surgeons of the Revolutionary army of 1776, and also those of General Wayne's army, which defeated the Indians in August, 1794, used this bark as an external application to gunshot wounds. Poultices made of the flour of the bark were applied to the wounds, which were soon brought to suppuration and to a disposition to heal. When tendency to mortification was evident, this bark, bruised and boiled in water, produced the most surprising good effects. On those occasions, also, the soldiers used it as nutriment, and it is stated that a soldier who lost his way supported himself for ten days upon this mucilage and that of sassafras. The Indians, it is said, resorted to it for nutriment in extreme emergencies. When eaten alone, however, it produces sour stomach and eructations. In fact, slippery elm is one of the most valuable articles in the *Materia Medica*. It is used to moisten the parched mouth, to correct irritation of the throat, lungs, stomach, and bowels, to lubricate all parts, to nourish weak stomachs, to relieve thirst, to give constant moisture and softness to a cataplasm, to roll up pills in, to aid in the action of enemas, &c., and, with charcoal and gum myrrh, to prevent mortification. Taken in large quantities, it has been known to expel worms by merely sliding them out of the body.

In summary, seek out sustainably grown and harvested Slippery Elm products. I hope you will learn to identify this important native tree and see if you can find one growing somewhere. Take on the challenge growing *Ulmus rubra* from seedlings and fresh seeds. Also, consider substituting the root of marshmallow (*Althaea officinalis*) to receive the same health benefits.