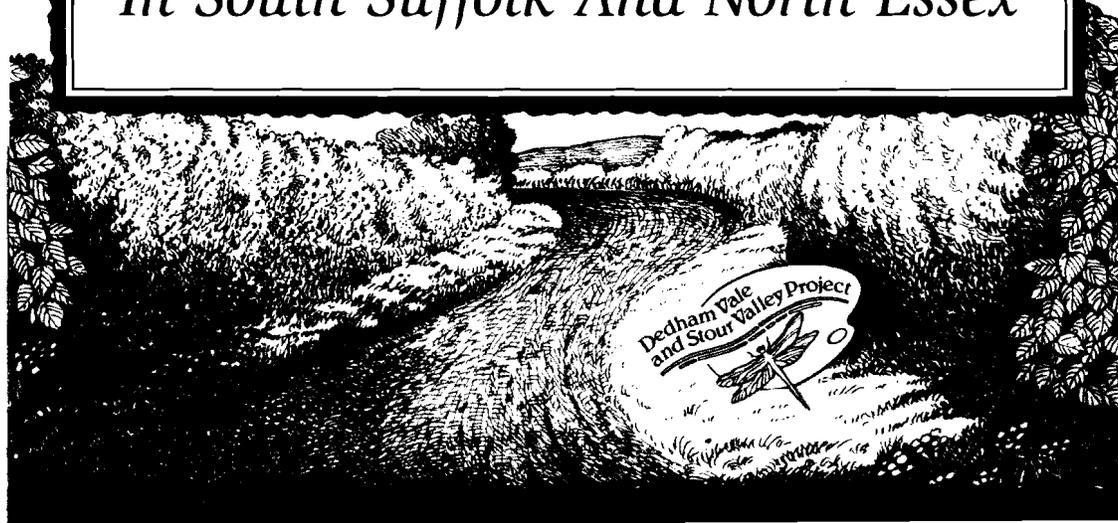


# *Elm Hedges*

**Cut them  
to keep them!**

*A Practical Guide To  
The Management Of Elm Hedges  
In South Suffolk And North Essex*





*A hedge full of dead elm trunks*

## ***The history of elm in our hedgerows***

Elm is a major component of many of the hedges of North Essex and South Suffolk. Elm has been used for hedging in Essex since the 1300's and certain varieties of elm are unique to this area. It was valued as a timber tree and its habit of throwing up new shoots from its roots helped to thicken hedges. Then along came Dutch elm disease. Although most of the elm trees have died, their root systems have survived and regularly throw up new suckers. Unfortunately these apparently healthy young elms succumb to the disease once they reach 10 to 20 years of age. No-one is quite sure why it takes this long for them to be affected. The fungus and the bark beetles that carry it show no signs of decline.

## ***Good reasons for keeping elm hedges:***

- Historians believe that elm disease has struck many times in the past but the elm has always recovered.
- A derelict elm hedge can be restored in less time than it takes for a newly planted hedge to grow to maturity. Maintaining an existing hedge is better for wildlife, game management and the landscape, than replacing it with a new hedge.
- Elm's habit of suckering means that planting up gaps is rarely necessary.
- Under the Hedgerow Regulations 1997 it's illegal to remove most countryside hedgerows without permission from the local planning authority.

## ***The real threat facing our elm hedges***

Every species depends on genetic diversity to enable it to adapt in a changing world. Everytime we *neglect* an elm hedge until it falls apart, or we *grub it out and replace it* with hawthorn we destroy some of this natural diversity. The elm's best hope of survival is to retain as many different local varieties in as many different hedges as possible. From these, nature will select the elm trees of the future when the disease eventually subsides.

## ***How best to manage elm hedges***

No-one is sure why, but young elms rarely show signs of infection. Maintaining healthy hedges depends on preventing mature wood from developing. The two techniques commonly used are *flailing and coppicing*.

Elm Hedges that are *flailed* annually or every other year often show little or no sign of disease for many years. Flailing slows down the rate of trunk growth. Flailing should aim to produce a thick hedge that merges into long grass at its base. Maintaining a variety of shapes and heights around the farm or property is probably best for wildlife.



*A hedge under good flail management*

Hedges that already contain dead stems are best *coppiced* (cutting off all the stems cleanly just above ground level). This stimulates the roots to throw up many new suckers which will grow up to 2 metres in their first year and rapidly form a good hedge. The longer the disease is left to spread through the hedge, the weaker the regrowth appears to be following coppicing. In most cases a respectable hedge will be formed within three years.

- Coppicing should ideally be carried out in rotation around a property or farm, with short lengths tackled each year. This minimises the impact on game, wildlife and the local landscape.
- All hedge management should occur in the winter when the shrubs are dormant and the impact on wildlife homes and food supplies is minimal.
- Overgrown elm hedges produce good firewood when coppiced. The small diameters involved rarely need splitting, and where the stems are already dead no seasoning is necessary.
- The new shoots that result from coppicing can be managed in two ways; Either allow to develop naturally and coppice again when the disease first reappears. Or introduce flail management.
- If flailed hedges begin to die back it is best to coppice them and recommence flailing when the regrowth has thickened up sufficiently.



*A recently coppiced hedge*

We strongly advise against the frequently seen practice of cutting off elm trunks at 4 to 6 feet above the ground. This rarely produces the desired thickening of the hedge and fails to stimulate the production of healthy young suckers.

***Produced by:***

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***Project supported by:***

Suffolk County Council, Essex County Council, Babergh District Council, Colchester Borough Council, Braintree District Council, The Borough of St Edmundsbury, Tendring District Council and the Countryside Agency.