American elm trees were once a very important part of our lowland forests. They also lined city streets and created a graceful canopy over roadways. These remarkable trees could live over 200 years and grow so large that several people joining hands could not reach around them. Today, it is hard to find an American elm that is larger than five inches in diameter.

In recent decades, American elms have succumbed to Dutch elm disease, caused by a fungus that is spread by elm bark beetles. The beetles carry the spores of the fungus from infected and dead elms to the branches and twigs of healthy ones. The fungus infects the healthy trees, which usually die. The fungus also moves through interconnected roots to kill other nearby elms.

The elm tree planted here was bred to tolerate Dutch elm disease. While it is the same species, this tree has traits that allow it to tolerate the disease. When infected, this elm may lose a few branches, but will probably survive and grow new healthy limbs.

Disease tolerant American elms will naturally reproduce and hopefully result in increased disease tolerance in future generations. With time and continued research, this old friend may one day return to grace America’s forests and cities.