New lease of life for London’s elms

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The Conservation Foundation will look at the role elm trees have played in the capital’s history and provide new trees for future generations.

“Many people think all the elms have gone, killed off by Dutch Elm Disease in the 70s, but we know of quite a few mature, healthy trees and there could well be many more.”

"This is the UN’s International Year of Biodiversity and so it’s an excellent time to be putting the spotlight on the biodiversity of London’s elm population for there are many elms growing here from around the world. Some are in our parks and gardens, but many more have been planted over the years by local authorities and are doing a great job greening the capital’s streets. Some of these could well have a resistance to disease which would enable them to be used in future propagation experiments.

“The Heritage Lottery Fund grant will help us launch a major survey throughout London which we hope will involve all of the London Tree Officers and tree wardens along with other enthusiasts, schools and the general public. We will provide help to those who want to know more about identifying elms and stage workshops for experts and enthusiasts to meet and have elm leaves identified" explained David Shreeve, Director of The Conservation Foundation.

As well as creating a comprehensive guide to where surviving elms are located within the M25 the project also includes plans to plant at least 1000 elm saplings, including in every street that has ‘elm’ in its name.

Dubbed ulmus londinium – Latin for London Elm – the project will produce a DVD as a teaching aid in schools and will also research and record the uses to which elm wood has been put throughout London’s history, including the very first water pipes and lock gates as well as a building material. The information gathered will form part of an exhibition that will display its use by crafts people and artists. The exhibition, which will be held in a prominent London venue, will also feature dramatic and dance performances, music and poetry.

“We want people to report examples of how elm has been used in London throughout the ages. Craftsmen of many sorts used elm making a wide range of items from bellows to coffins and as part of the project we are hoping to stage an exhibition showing how craftsmen still use elm to create artworks and fine furniture” said Mr Shreeve.

Head of Heritage Lottery Fund London, Sue Bowers, said: “This project will provide a definitive record of London’s elm population and help to restore the historical landscape of London, as well as creating opportunities for people to understand how elm wood has been used in many different ways through the ages. It is a fitting contribution to the International Year of Biodiversity.”

Work on the project is beginning immediately and will culminate in 2012 when the Foundation celebrates its 30th Anniversary. Says David Shreeve, “The roots of our Foundation go back to an elm project which planted several of London’s elms which are still growing strong. This award will not only increase interest in the elm, but we hope it will also be a way of celebrating the very wide ranging environmental work of the Foundation since 1982.”