

I Want Pretty Leaves

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

I am routinely asked by homeowners for recommendations on trees to plant in their yards and quite often one of the things they want (in conjunction with fast growing and strong), is pretty fall color. "I want trees that look like those in New England" is usually the next sentence. Well, I'm sorry to break the news to you, but this is Kansas, not New England. Secondly, I was in New England a couple of weeks ago and the colors were nothing to write home about. A drought this summer and abnormally warm September had delayed and muted the colors. And right there is part of the problem!

How beautiful fall foliage will be is a complex scenario in any given year. It starts with the species of trees in an area. Next you have to consider what the growing season was like. Poor growing seasons (heat and drought) will greatly diminish the fall colors. Next you have to have a fall season that avoids sudden hard freezes but have warm sunny days and cool crisp nights. This allows the chlorophyll (the green color in leaves), to quickly dissipate leaving all the other striking colors behind.

One other consideration that is often overlooked is the wind. Well before tree leaves show any color change the tree has already shut off the flow of water and nutrients to the leaf. An abscission layer is formed which is where the leaf will eventually break away from the tree. As the fall progresses this point of contact becomes weaker and weaker until gravity or the force of the wind exceeds the strength of this connection. Earlier this week we had some strong winds. Those winds were whipping leaves off of trees and sending them scurrying down the street. In parts of the country noted for fall foliage, they rarely have wind conditions like we do here in the plains. You might say, that's just the way the wind blows!

When people talk about brilliant fall foliage, they are usually referring to the oranges and reds that we associate with sugar and red maples. Red maples are not native to Kansas and sugar maples only native to the eastern border of the state. Both species prefer climates that are cooler and or wetter, and that includes higher humidity in the summer months. Red maples really need a lot of care to thrive here; sugar maples can actually do okay.

While our two native oaks, bur and chinquapin, have quite unimpressive fall color, others like red, scarlet and pin do have some nice fall color but can be sensitive to soil conditions so proceed with caution. But these may be your best choices for good durable color. American elms which have not yet succumbed to Dutch elm disease have striking yellow fall foliage, but many of the other elms are somewhat disappointing. Sweetgum can have attractive fall color but many homeowners object to their medium sized and somewhat prickly seed pods.

Cottonwoods can have brilliant yellow leaves but in wet years like this, leaf diseases can knock the leaves off before they become very colorful. Green ash and white ash both have nice fall color and grow quite well around here, but are now at great risk due to the emerald ash borer insect pest slowly marching this way from the east. I can not advise anyone to plant an ash tree.

There are also numerous small trees and shrubs that can provide good fall color. If you want some specific suggestions, give me a call. I love good fall color as much as the next homeowner, but our choices for large trees with good fall color are truly limited here in Kansas. For suggestions for your specific location give me a call or stop by the office and we can talk about it!