

## Will We Have Good Fall Color This Year?

### AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Many people think of many different things when autumn rolls around. Invariably one's thoughts of autumn hone in on the gorgeous colors of the natural world in a season of change. Those of us that grew up in the Great Plains associate fall colors more so with yellows and browns than with oranges and reds. That very simple fact comes back to the native trees and the colors that their leaves change to in the fall.

Our native trees generally have fall leaf colors of brownish or yellow. Some plants will have splashes of red, generally smooth sumac, Virginia creeper and poison ivy. Our native white oaks generally go from green to brown. Walnuts, pecans, hickories, ash, elms and maples will often go to yellow, sometimes a dull yellow, sometimes a brilliant yellow. Other than the aforementioned plants with red leaves, if you want fall color in the reds or oranges, you're going to have to go with non-natives.

In the hardwood forests of the north and northeast, the brilliant color comes from maples. Sugar maple and red maple are the most commonly thought of but even some of these can end up with very unimpressive yellow leaves, partially because of the genetics and partially because of the weather. Oaks in the red oak family, like northern or southern red oak and scarlet oak can develop some very nice deep red color and will do well in most landscapes.

Our native green ash has yellow leaves and the white ash of the eastern states will have deep purple leaves. The callary pear family, including Bradford pears, are also known for deep red leaves in the fall. But ultimately, the fall color is very dependent on the weather.

The colors that we look forward to in the fall have been present all summer long. But these colors are masked by the green of the chlorophyll. The leaf has to die and the chlorophyll has to start to go away so that the yellows, oranges and purples can start to show up. The best condition to have maximum color show up is warm sunny days and cool crisp nights. Extreme heat or drought can really mess up development of the color pigments as can cloudy days and warm nights in the fall.

You don't want a hard frost too soon because this will simply kill the leaves causing them to drop off before they can develop the desired color. Fortunately we've been in a stretch of good conditions for leaf color development. Some folks think that fall may be running late, but really we're right on schedule. I'm starting to see maples really changing fast as are the ashes and elms. (I really like this time of year with the American elms as they take on a very calico look with some leaves still wonderfully green and others bright yellow). The red oaks and the callary pears are still holding on to their green, but you can pick up a hint of color in parts of the tree.

As the days grow shorter, the transition will happen ever faster. You can literally see changes daily in the trees. Once the colors really start to show up it won't be long before the leaves are gone completely. The window of opportunity is quite short once colors start to peak. But in the meantime, take note of trees you like. Snap a photo, especially close up of a leaf so if you ask me what it is, I can tell you. Also, take a weekend afternoon for a leisurely drive down one of our valley roads in the county. Not only are the trees getting beautiful, but the pastures themselves are exceptionally beautiful this fall. The natural world is getting ready for a long winter's nap, so enjoy the colors of transition while you can!

