

## The Trees They are a Changing

### AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

I figured out a long time ago that as I am out and about, often driving (which should scare a lot of you), that I'm seeing the world around me differently than most people. Of course I'm looking at the traffic, usually, but beyond that I'm looking at the plants and the birds. This time of year there's a lot of change starting to happen. But much of it is subtle and easily overlooked if you don't even know to look for it.

Trees start to grow much earlier in the season than most homeowners realize. It's one of the reasons I prefer fall planting of trees over spring planting. Roots are becoming active already and sap is starting to flow up in trees. Elms and maples already have buds starting to swell and expand. The first buds to become active are flower buds. All it will take is a few more warm days over the next couple of weeks and we could start to have elm and maples starting to bloom. Which means that if you have seasonal allergies, these could be one of your triggers! Leaf buds will come later on these trees.

Buds on some fruit trees, especially peaches, will start swelling soon. This is important as a very common peach disease, peach leaf curl, infects leaves as the buds start to swell and open. It is easily prevented by an application of chlorothalonil any day that the temperature is going to be above 40 degrees for several hours. But get it done soon or it will be too late!

But the trees where I really notice the changes in late winter is on our native juniper, the eastern red cedar. If you take a little time to notice them right now you will easily see that many of them have developed a very rusty brown color, while others still seem to be a nice basic juniper green. I've even had people call to ask if their cedar trees were dying. While cedar trees will turn brown and die occasionally, it's more of a very light brown foliage color when this happens.

In the case of the rusty brown color, the trees aren't dying. These are developing male flower buds. In several more weeks they will start releasing pollen and if you are in the right place at the right time, first thing in the morning, it can look like fog or smoke drifting out of the cedar trees.

So why aren't all of the trees that rusty brown color? Junipers are what we call dioecious. Dioecious, roughly translated from the Greek, means two houses. Cedars have separate male and female trees. Most of the cedar trees, well, those that are at least five or six years old, that are still a nice green color, are female trees. In many cases you may even still be seeing the little blue berries on the tree if the birds haven't eaten them already.

While the male flowers are out on the tips of the branches the female flowers are very small and tucked back in a little ways on the branches where there is more protection. While the flower buds on both sexes of trees are developing right now, the actual blooming and pollination won't take place for about another month. For photos showing the flowers under magnification go to: <http://gearycountyextension.com/Hort/cedars.htm>.

In the weeks ahead a lot of the trees will be undergoing changes. I'm sure cottonwood buds are starting to swell already as well. By the way, cottonwood is another dioecious tree. Cotton-less cottonwoods are nothing more than male trees. Take some time, in what often seems the dead of winter, to start looking for signs of spring all around you!