

The Culprit Isn't Always the Obvious One

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

There's been a lot of sniffing, sneezing and watery eyes going on, including both residents of our household. We used to call it hay fever, but hay was rarely the problem. Now days we call it seasonal allergies. If you suffer from seasonal allergies every year, or this is your first experience with it as you've moved into this region for the first time, please go and see your family doctor. There's a lot that can be done to lessen the symptoms. This column isn't about dealing with the symptoms, but more about helping you understand the cause of your symptoms.

Allergies can happen just about anytime of the year. In my opinion, everyone is allergic to something. Poison ivy is an allergic reaction. Chigger bites are another form of an allergic reaction. But seasonal allergies are tied to specific seasons. They are triggered by pollen of blooming plants. While there are plants blooming from before the last frost of spring until after the last frost of fall, we do have two big peak pollen load times; in mid spring and again in late summer.

Pollen is released from the male parts of flowers hoping to be transferred to the female parts of flowers so that its genetic material package can initiate a seed and that plant's genes will be carried forward to a new generation of plants. We need pollen. Without pollen we have no grains, no vegetables, no fruits, we all die of starvation. Pollen is essential to life. Pollen is transferred from the male to female flowers basically in three ways. In a "perfect" flower, like peas and other legumes, the two flower parts are nestled together in the same floral structure and it's a very short distance between the two. The pollen can literally fall onto its target. Mission accomplished.

In many other plants it isn't that simple. There may be separate male and female flowers sometimes on the same plant, sometimes on separate plants. The ubiquitous cedar trees have male trees and females trees. All the flowers on a single tree are either going to shed pollen or they will receive pollen. This explains why some cedar trees are loaded with little blue berries right now and others aren't. Some plants can't pollinate themselves even though they have both male and female flowers on the same plant. Many of our fruit trees fall into this category. In all of these cases the pollen needs to be moved from one flower to another flower. The two common ways that this will happen is through insects like bees (and sometimes other creatures including bats) or moved by the wind.

If a plant has highly visible showy flowers like fruit trees or goldenrod, then they likely need a pollinator. The flower is an advertisement. The pollen from these trees simply doesn't blow well in the wind for whatever reason. It has to have assistance. The showier the flower the more dependent it is on pollinator assistance. This pollen isn't prevalent in the air during pollen counts. But plants like grasses or ragweed, well, people rarely notice the flowers of these plants. Their pollen carries just fine in the wind. The pollen of these plants is what shows up on daily pollen counts. These are the culprits of your seasonal allergies. Ragweed and other weeds with unshowy flowers are really busy blooming right now. The plants are big because of all the rain and big plants have lots of flowers!

So as you go about your business in the coming weeks with the runny nose and all the sneezing, praying for a hard freeze to reduce your misery, please don't blame the pretty wildflowers blooming around the region. It's not their fault! Blame the flowers you don't see!