

Trying to Deal with Sneezin' Season

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Many people, myself included, suffer from seasonal allergies, or what we used to just call, "hay fever". For most of us, those allergic responses are triggered by pollen which winds up in our eyes, our nose, and out lungs which then brings us hours of misery. But over the years there has been much misunderstanding about the culprits of our sniffles and sneezes.

Most plants have flowers. It's a must if the plant is going to produce seed. Not to get too deep into this but there are male flower parts and female flower parts. The male flower parts produce pollen which then has to get to the female flower parts in a timely manner so that a seed can be developed. In most plants this pollen transfer is going to occur one of three ways.

In some flowers the male and female flower parts are in close proximity within the same floral structure and the pollen only has to travel a short distance. Which is all well and good as long as the plant isn't self sterile meaning it needs pollen from another plant. When plants need to cross pollinate there are two basic ways that pollen moves. It may be moved by an insect (bees commonly) or in specialized cases by bats or by birds like hummingbirds. Or, the pollen may be dispersed in the air by the wind. Wind dispersed pollen is very small and fine and really designed to be easily blown by the wind. Pollen that is creature transferred is often very clumpy and not easily dispersed by the wind, but easily gets stuck on fur, feathers or in a bee's pollen baskets.

Plants that need assisted pollination have developed ways to facilitate this. They are called showy flowers or sometimes very strongly scented flowers (and not always a pleasing scent I might add!) Those showy flowers that we see are an advertisement to the critters that do the pollen transfer. The flowers often also provide a nectar reward to encourage the creatures to visit and revisit for pollination purposes.

The flowers that rely on wind assisted pollination don't need to waste energy growing fancy flowers or producing nectar. They just produce pollen, a gust of wind hits the plant and the pollen is carried everywhere. Virtually all of our grass plants are wind pollinated, but so are many other species of plants.

Here's where we often become confused. We have a couple of sunny, warm, windy days and we start sneezing. We look around and we see goldenrod blooming, and sunflowers blooming and any other multitude of late summer blooming plants; and we develop a cause and effect. But remember what I just said that showy plants are advertising for pollinators because their pollen is not easily distributed by the wind. Could you be allergic to goldenrod or sunflowers? Absolutely! But unless you are working right around them, it is highly unlikely that you would be exposed to enough pollen to create a reaction.

On the other hand, what you don't notice blooming right now is ragweed (three different species around here), native grasses, several species of "weeds" in the Chenopodiaceae family like kochia and lambsquarter and even pigweeds and amaranth. These are all abundant pollen (and seed) producers with pollen that is everywhere. The cool rainy weather earlier this week likely helped many of us as the pollen was settled by the rain and cold weather reduced flowering, at least for a while anyway.

The good news is that once we have had a couple of hard freezes, most of the pollen production will be done until March. The bad news is that frost is probable four to six weeks away yet. So in the meantime keep your nasal sprays, antihistamines, and tissues close at hand!