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Planning For Good Fall Color

AGRI-VIEWS
by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

I'm always somewhat amused about people's reaction to fall color. When you mention fall color, people always immediately think of trees, especially trees with red, orange or brilliant yellow foliage. Ironically, we don't have a lot of native trees with red or orange leaves. But when people focus on tree color, they miss so many other awesome things about our autumnal hues.

The colors of fall come from many natural plant compounds in the leaves of trees, shrubs, woody vines, even grasses and forbs. Those compounds are present all summer long but are masked by the much more overwhelming green color from chlorophyll. As we move into fall, the plant literally turns off the spigot that keeps the chlorophyll alive, the green color fades and then we get to see what's left. How brilliant the color is during any fall season depends on genetics of the plant, the growing conditions during the year and the weather conditions from September 1 until the leaves finally fall.

To get really good fall colors we need sunny warm days and cool crisp nights. A hard frost too early will freeze the leaves and knock them to the ground before the good color develops. On any given tree there will also be variations in color. The leaves that get full sunlight will generally develop the more intense colors while the trees that are inside the canopy will tend to be more muted.

Some of our best red coloration, in native plants, is not in trees but in shrubs like smooth sumac or on vines like Virginia Creeper and even poison ivy! Much of the color in the native pastures also comes from the native grasses like Indiangrass, or big and little bluestem. Don't discriminate against the more subtle hues when thinking fall color! Unfortunately, many of our native trees aren't that brilliant. Silver maples and cottonwoods can have beautiful yellow colors as can our walnuts and pecans. The native oaks, not so much. Off yellow to tans and browns seem to be their natural inclination.

Our native green ash and American elm have beautiful yellow fall color, but American elms are slowly dying from Dutch Elm Disease and the ash are at threat from the Emerald Ash Borer slowly moving this way. I would not encourage trying to plant either one of these species. If you want to plant some new trees to give you some fall color, I'd lean towards some of the maples and oaks.

Red and scarlet oaks are options. While not quite as bright as the maples, these are both better suited to our climate. Avoid pin oak however as our alkaline soils tend to give them long term issues with iron chlorosis. Sugar maples, red maples and the various hybrids in between will probably give you the most intense fall color but proceed with caution. These maples are marginally suited to our climate. They need full sun to develop the best color, but they are sensitive to scorch and bark scald. Caddo sugar maple is probably the best adapted. If you are planting a maple, plant a small one. The larger the tree you transplant the more shock it will have, the slower it will grow and establish, and the more scorch and sunscald issues the tree will have. A small tree just a couple feet tall will be easier to transplant and ultimately perform better, surpassing much larger trees in a few years.

If you see a tree you really like, take a photo of it, and an in focus close up of the leaf and send it to me or bring it in. I can identify it and then help you determine if it is well suited to your yard!

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