

The Real Culprit

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

We used to call it hay fever but now days we call it seasonal allergies and many people experience them. The symptoms may be minor and only somewhat annoying in the form of a runny nose and sneezing. Or they may be far worse and include horribly itchy eyes, extreme sinus issues, constant sneezing and coughing. These can get to the point of being downright debilitating. I am not a medical doctor but if you have any of these symptoms annually at certain times of the year, talk to your physician. Life's too short to be cooped up inside and being miserable when you go outside.

I have seasonal allergies myself. In the spring it's mainly elms and maples and before too long, maybe even already in fact, it'll be good old ragweed. I take my medication daily and that keeps it enough under control that my life goes on fairly normally. People spend a lot of time talking about what they are allergic to but unless they've had an actual allergy skin test they may just be guessing. I haven't had that yet, but I know what is blooming and what I've tended to react too. Unfortunately, far too many people start blaming what is the most visible.

Let's try to understand seasonal allergies and what causes them. The two most common allergy causing particles are pollen and mold (fungus) spores. These are both tiny, often times so tiny they are hard to see with the naked eye, particles that we inhale, get into our eyes and that triggers the histamine response that causes the aforementioned symptoms and why we have to take antihistamines to get relief. Naturally people can also be allergic to food or just about anything but here we are talking seasonal allergies!

Not all pollen is created equally however. Some plant species are wind pollinated and other species are creature pollinated, often bees and wasps, but other insects and even bats in some parts of the world. Wind pollinated plants just need is a gust of wind and their pollen becomes airborne for us all to inhale. Since they aren't dependent on insects they haven't wasted energy making pretty flowers to attract those insects. Plants that do have showy bright colored flowers are advertising for pollinators. They are advertising because they need the critters assistance. The pollen of wind pollinated plants tends to be tiny, singular and free flowing. Bees may collect that pollen but the plants are not dependent on it. The pollen from all those showy flowers tends to be big and clumpy. It is often quite sticky. The wind simply does not move it around.

While you can be allergic to the pollen of showy plants, your chance of encountering it is substantially lower than pollen that is wind dispersed. In the weeks ahead the goldenrod will start blooming and people will start sneezing. Since they can readily see the goldenrod, that is what will get the blame, even though the wind can only blow the pollen about two inches. What nobody sees blooming though is ragweed, which tends to be very allergenic!

I have a friend who has been tested and is allergic to cottonwood. When they see cottonwood flying they blame their symptoms on the cottonwood. But from everything I've been able to study, the cotton isn't allergenic, but you'll never convince them of that. I don't even tell them to look deeper into what is blooming when they are sneezing because they're convinced it's the cottonwood cotton. Look for the real culprit that is blooming when the sneezes start, and then take the time to visit with your family doctor to try to deal with the symptoms! Seasonal allergies are truly nothing to sneeze at!