

I Want A Pretty Tree!

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Because of some of the warm sunny days, cool nights and lack of a hard killing freeze, we are seeing some gorgeous autumn leaf color around the area. Which invariably then brings out many homeowners asking me what this or that tree that they are seeing is. Usually it's by address or occasionally they try to describe it - come on folks, most of you have a phone on your camera. Take a photo of it. That way I don't have to do a psychic plant identification.

One of the challenges that we face is that compared to many parts of the eastern and northeastern US we simply don't have native trees with the brilliant reds and oranges. Many of the trees that produce the brilliant fall foliage are not well adapted to our area. Let's take a few minutes to work our way through the list of trees that can have really nice fall color and why they may or may not be well suited to your yard. Let's also keep in mind that some years you may have brilliant color out of these trees and the next year the same tree may have very lackluster color. It comes down to the weather and growing conditions that year .

The native green ash and white ash can have nice yellow or purplish yellow fall colors. Unfortunately the insect pest, emerald ash borer, is now within 75 miles of Geary County and once it is here we will start losing our ash trees. It is inevitable. Do not plant any more ash trees for that very reason. If you have ash trees on your property, you might want to start planning for replacement trees and get those planted even before the ash trees die.

Our most common native oaks, the bur oak and chinkapin oak, are pretty much reduced to brown or subdued yellow fall colors. Nothing to write home about. The red oaks do have better fall color than the white oaks but are also more subject to the vagaries of weather than say the sugar or red maples. The red oaks, as a group, are very good trees for our area. They have faster growth rate than many homeowners think of when they here "oak" and are quite hardy and sturdy. My favorites are northern red oak, scarlet oak, and Shumard oak. I do not recommend pin oaks as they can have issues with iron chlorosis in high pH soils that we may encounter.

Two lesser utilized trees that can have good fall color are the sweet gum and ginkgo. I saw a very nicely colored ginkgo tree in the area recently with bright yellow leaves. They are slow growing and make sure you get a named male cultivar. Sweet gum has some desirable characteristics for form, strength and fall color that can range from yellow to red to purple. They do have a drawback in that the seed capsules are large, up to 1½ inches and can be persistent and annoying. Some people call them porcupine eggs for a reason.

Which brings us to the holy grail of fall color tree species, the maples. We have lots of silver maples around. Silver maples can have brilliant yellow fall color, but the tree is weedy, weak and short lived. Red maples, with their brilliant red foliage, and sugar maples, with their orangish red fall foliage are really what homeowners want. Red maples are not well suited to our climate. While I do see some nice red maples, I can also point our ten red maples doing poorly for everyone one that looks good. A better alternative is one of the Caddo sugar maples. These are native to west central Oklahoma and can handle our hot dry summer weather just fine. Cultivars to look for include Legacy, John Pair and Autumn Splendor. Always remember to match the tree to the location and then give it proper care, including proper watering, in the first five years it's in your yard! For more details on trees and tree selection contact me at the Extension Office!