Enjoy the colors of fall by planting the right trees

Travelers often journey north during autumn on a mission to see fall color. Some years they are rewarded with spectacular views. Sometimes the display is muted.

Have you ever wondered the basis of the beautiful colors? With the change in seasons, chemical processes that occur in tree leaves cause them to change color. It all centers on a pigment known as chlorophyll.

If you remember your high school science, then you’ll connect chlorophyll with the process of photosynthesis. What you may not remember is that there are often other pigments, or colors, in a leaf. We don’t see these other pigments most of the year because they are masked by the chlorophyll pigment.

As the days get shorter and temperatures cool off, photosynthesis slows. Since the chlorophyll is no longer needed, it breaks down leaving the other colors visible. The yellows, oranges and reds that you see in the fall were really present in the leaves all along.

Temperature, water, light and chlorophyll residue all determine just how bright and striking the colors will be. These factors also determine how long the color will hang around. Sunny warm days, cool nights and occasional rains produce the best fall colors.

While Florida isn’t known for its spectacular autumn leaf displays, we do have several wonderful trees that you can plant for great fall color.

- **Red maple:** This is a large native tree found throughout Florida. Its leaves turn yellow, red, orange or purple.
- **Sweetgum:** This proven native is a large tree with star-shaped leaves. The leaves can turn red, yellow, or purple.
- **Bald cypress:** Its feathery foliage turns from soft green to a deep shade of gold or bronze before falling.
- **Oaks:** There are a number of dependable oaks for fall color. Shumard, nuttall and turkey are a few to consider. These oaks have fairly dark green deeply-lobed leaves during summer turning vivid red to red-orange in fall. The turkey oak is sometimes referred to as “scrub” oak and is quite common on our deep sandy soils. It is short lived as compared to most oak species, living for fifteen to thirty years.
years before it starts to decline and die.

- **Blackgum**: This tree is a little slow in its growth rate but can eventually grow to seventy five feet in height. It provides a bright show of red to deep purple fall foliage.

_Bald cypress (left) and red maple (right) are two Florida native trees that give us beautiful fall color_  
Photo credits: Theresa Friday

There are other trees that provide Northwest Florida with fall color, but these you may want to avoid.

- **‘Bradford’ pear**: These trees are known for their bright red color in the fall, but they often suffer from broken branches and are usually short-lived.
Chinese tallow: Also known as the popcorn tree, this is one of the first trees to show color in our area. However, research has shown that the Chinese tallow is an invasive species, meaning that it grows and spreads rapidly, and it takes over natural areas. Birds eat the seeds and their droppings spread the tallow to other landscapes and natural areas. Seeds can also be carried to other new sites by water. Floridians can help slow the further spread of Chinese tallow by removing these hard-to-kill trees from their properties.

Start planting the right trees now, and you could be enjoying great fall color in years to come!

The invasive Chinese tallow tree should be removed from landscapes even though it produces nice fall color

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Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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