

Trees for Fall Foliage

by Valerie Rose

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Autumn is a second spring when every leaf is a flower. ~Albert Camus

Winter's palate of brown, gray and green have taken over my garden, while images of dazzling autumn foliage stream from New England's renowned forests. Some of those radiant reds, outrageous oranges and glorious shades of gold can also shine in northwest gardens.

Flame-colored maples are autumn's sentinels. A wide variety of maples are known for dazzling fall color, from New England to the northwest. Many cultivars of Red Maple (*Acer rubrum*) feature vibrant hues. These are large, fairly fast-growing trees, with heights up to 60 feet. Make sure you have enough room for the mature tree - plan before you plant!

Colorful Northwest Natives

Most of the colorful maple trees in the northwest are introduced species from other parts of North America or Asia. The Vine Maple (*Acer circinatum*) is a beloved native variety, found along the Pacific Coast from Canada to northern California. Fall colors depend on where the Vine Maple is growing: they lean toward yellow in the shade, crimson in the sun. It's essentially a shade-loving tree with a sprawling shape. If planted in a sunny spot, a Vine Maple may need extra water.



Autumn Flame Red Maple (*Acer rubrum* Autumn Flame) Photo by Frank Varga/Skagit Valley Herald



Majestic Whitebeam Mountain Ash (*Sorbus aria* Majestic) Photo by Frank Varga/Skagit Valley Herald

Another northwest native, the Sitka mountain ash (*Sorbus sitchensis*) is found along the Pacific Coast from northern California to Alaska. This small deciduous tree, with finely toothed leaflets, fits well in many garden settings. From late summer to fall, orange to scarlet berries attract birds, while orange to orange-red foliage attract compliments from humans.

Serviceberry (*Amelanchier*) is a small tree native to western Canada and the mountains of the western United States. Early spring brings white flowers, followed by half-inch purple berries, a popular food for birds. New foliage is purple, turning a deep green in summer and blazing orange in fall.

Is it a Maple Tree?

The Sweetgum or Liquidambar is sometimes mistaken for a maple, with its similarly shaped leaves. The Sweetgum's distinctive fruits (not edible by humans) are spiny balls, not found on any maple tree. Sweetgum's autumn foliage varies from red to gold to purple. A specific variety can vary in color from one area to another, with many in one tree at the same time!

Some people object to the Sweetgum's fallen seedpods. A good alternative is the Katsura tree (*Cercidiphyllum japonicum*) and its shrub look-alike, redbud hazel (*Disanthus cerdifolius*.) Like the Sweetgum, these substitutes can have yellow, red and deep purple leaves at the same time. Native to China and Japan, Katsuras do best in a sheltered area with regular watering. With shaggy bark and heart-shaped leaves, the Katsura is a distinctive landscape tree.



Photo courtesy of www.ubcbotanicalgarden.org
The leaves of the Katsura tree (*Cercidiphyllum japonicum*) can turn yellow, red and deep purple at the same time.



Persian Ironwood (*Parrotia persica*) Photo by Frank Varga/Skagit Valley Herald

Witch hazel (*Hamamelis*) grows to the size of a large shrub or small tree. North America, Japan and China all have native species of witch hazel. Bright fall foliage adorns the irregular, branching form. Most varieties have distinctive spidery yellow flowers from fall to winter, and some are mildly fragrant.

Another member of the witch hazel family, Persian Ironwood (*Parrotia persica*) features an array of colors throughout the year. Small red flowers appear between January and March, while bark flakes off the trunk and branches, creating a patchwork of gray and white. In springtime, new foliage emerges in reddish-purple hues, turning to deep green. The leaves finish their season by turning orange, red and yellow.

The Maidenhair tree (*Ginkgo biloba*) is one of the oldest living tree species. Its 3 inch-long fan-shaped leaves have been found in fossil form dating back 150 million years! When planted in your yard, the soft green leaves turn brilliant gold in fall. This tree needs lots of room to grow, maturing from 60 to 80 feet high.

A Living Fossil

Sourwood (*Oxydendrum arboretum*) grows to 20 feet in the northwest, but is native to the southeastern United States. The shoots were used by members of the Cherokee and Catawba tribes to make arrowshafts. Sourwood trees are pyramid-shaped, with branches draping

gracefully toward the ground. The fruit is a small, woody capsule, not edible by humans - but people do enjoy the tree's red and orange fall colors.

Finally, don't forget the many varieties of Japanese Maples (*Acer palmatum*). These smallish trees provide graceful, delicate texture and dazzling fall colors of red, copper and gold.

Autumn is a great time to plant trees and conserve water. Instead of repeatedly watering a summer-planted sapling, fall and winter rains help roots establish in their new home. Research and planning will help you make a successful choice of which tree to plant. Remember, they're so cute when they're little, but a fast-growing Red Maple may be 60 feet tall at maturity. Measure space for the adult tree, not just the young'un.



Burning Bush (*Euonymus alatus* or Winged Euonymus)
Photo by Frank Varga/Skagit Valley Herald

It's worth the effort to find the right variety for your yard. Choosing a tree for its autumn color will enliven your landscape for years, providing a treat (not a trick!) for the eyes.

**WSU Master Gardeners Know & Grow Workshop
'20 Great Trees and Shrubs for Fall Color in Skagit Valley'**

When: Tuesday October 12,
Time: 1:00 - 2:30 p.m.
Cost: Free!
Where: WSU Mount Vernon NW Research and Extension Center,
16650 State Route 536 (Memorial Highway),
Info: Sue Christianson of Chrishaven Trees shares information
about choosing and planting trees for fall foliage.

For more workshop information call 360-428-4720 ext. 0.

RESOURCES:

- *See Plants Turn Fall Color Before You Buy Them*, Oregon State University:
http://extension.oregonstate.edu/news/story.php?S_No=1004&storyType=garden
- *Great Plant Picks: Fall Color*, WSU Clark County Extension Service:
www.greatplantpicks.org/search?searchterm=fall+color
- *Landscape Plants, Varieties of Maple Trees*, Oregon State University:
<http://oregonstate.edu/dept/ldplants/1plants.htm#acer>
- Chrishaven Trees: www.nurseryguide.com/browseresults2.lasso?IDCode=23170
- Garden Gazette/Christianson Nursery Newsletter, October 2010:
www.christiansonnursery.com/CN/1fs/1fs.html