

Some foliage change is normal now

Cooler temperatures and shorter day length of fall brings on changes within the foliage of our landscape plants and lawns.

It's common for azaleas to lose a few leaves now. These are mostly the older, larger leaves near the center and lower portions of the plant. These leaves turn reddish or yellow and drop from the plant. This is normal from now until spring.

Yellow leaves may appear on camellias, gardenias, cherry laurel and oleanders. As with azaleas, these are the older, larger leaves. It's normal for these leaves to drop from plants now until spring. However, don't confuse scale damage on camellias for normal aging of leaves. Scale insects feed on the lower surface of camellia leaves causing them to become splotched with yellow.

Many leaves on sycamore trees have changed from green to brown. Although this phenomenon occurs every year, it's not brought on by change in day length or temperature. It's the result of insects feeding on the leaves. By the time damage is visible, there's little that can be done to correct it. However, the problem will take care of itself since sycamore trees will soon be dropping their leaves.

Although Florida is not known for exciting fall color, there are enough temperate region plants to provide some fall color, especially in North Florida. Many of the pigments that contribute to the bright colors of autumn are present in leaves from the time they emerge in spring. During spring and summer the green pigment (chlorophyll) dominates the other pigments and is the major visible color in most leaves. During fall, production of new chlorophyll slows and is finally depleted while other pigments become more evident. The orange, red and yellow colored leaves are the expressions of carotenoid pigments. Anthocyanin pigments are responsible for the red and purple color of dogwoods, crape myrtles and Bradford pears.

Lawngrasses also experience some seasonal changes. Growth of lawngrasses slows in fall. Although this slow down means less mowing, it also means that lawns will not be as attractive as they were during spring and summer. Because of this reduced growth rate, grasses cannot produce enough new leaves to replace the leaves that are dying naturally. The end result is a dull, yellow-green lawn.

Numerous reddish purple blades throughout the lawn may be visible now as well. Cooler temperatures, injury to the leaf blades from foot traffic, mowing equipment, vehicles, etc, can cause this. It also could be caused by lack of potassium or phosphorus but is more likely the result of cooler temperatures, especially if it did not show up until fall.

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