Trees for fall color

Every fall I enjoy the change in leave color in many of the deciduous plants in North Florida. I've heard it said, "It looks like someone took a paintbrush and painted the forest."

Even though Florida is not known for the brilliant fall color enjoyed by some of our northern neighbors, we do have a good number of trees from which to choose to provide some fall color in our landscapes.

Our native flowering dogwood consistently provides some change in color before dropping its leaves. You can expect a red to maroon color in many of the dogwood leaves during fall.

Some of North Florida’s native maples will produce good color each fall. Red maple provides brilliant red, orange and sometimes yellow leaves. There are relatively new cultivars available such as ‘October Glory’ and ‘Red Sunset’ that are named for their nice fall color. The native Florida Maple, *Acer saccharum var. floridum*, displays a combination of bright yellow and orange color during fall. It is a little difficult to find in local nurseries, though. And there are many Japanese maples that provide striking fall color.

Another excellent native tree that is difficult to find in nurseries is Blackgum, *Nyssa sylvatica*. This tree is a little slow in its growth rate but can eventually grow to seventy-five feet in height. It deserves more use in our landscapes. It always provides a bright show of red to deep purple fall foliage.

Crape myrtle, one of my favorite landscape plants, gives varying degrees of orange, red and yellow in its leaves before they fall. And there are many cultivars - some that grow several feet to almost thirty feet in mature height.

There are a number of dependable oaks for fall color, too. 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 before it starts to decline and die. It generally does not grow very large in height or trunk diameter and is probably not grown or sold much because it is so common in the wild. Nuttall and Shumard are becoming better available.

Sweetgum is another common native tree that comes to mind when considering fall color. But some people dislike this tree because of the one to three inch round fruit (commonly called sweetgum balls) that it produces, which can be a nuisance as they fall on the ground around the tree. And this tree produces large surface roots that can be a problem for mowers, nearby curbs and sidewalks. But its star-shaped leaves turn bright red, purple, yellow or orange in fall.
Other trees provide bright yellow fall leaves. Our native yellow poplar is an example. Our native hickories are covered in yellow leaves most falls. And it’s difficult to find a more crisp yellow than fall ginkgo leaves.

These trees represent just a few choices for fall color. If you can include some of these plants in your landscape, you’ll enjoy the color of fall for many years right in your own backyard.

Larry Williams
Extension Agent, Horticulture
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