

Plant for Fall Color

So many people have said, “Hasn’t the fall color been wonderful this year!” and they do not mean just the quadrennial explosion of red, white and blue but red, orange and gold as well. There are echoes in that observation: I think I hear it every fall but surely even into November the reds are redder and the golds more glorious this year? For example, have the dogwoods ever been more stunning or the crepe myrtles more varied?

If you haven’t found one yet keep searching for *Ginkgo biloba*, the maidenhair tree. Because it, like the dawn redwood, is known from fossils dating back 100 million years or so, it has an historical aura. It was once thought to be extinct in the wild before being rediscovered. Attractive in all seasons, it is cherished for the way the fan-shaped leaves behave in autumn. On long stems, each leaf turns a liquid clear yellow so the slim tree appears to shimmer against a blue sky. Then, as if by secret agreement, the leaves fall like a petticoat, circling the tree.

If shopping for the *Ginkgo* make sure you buy a male tree. The decaying fruit of the female has an unpleasant odor, although the nuts are edible. Two cultivars, ‘Princeton Sentry’ and ‘Autumn Gold’ are especially beautiful. Almost the same yellow is the Littleleaf Linden, *Tilia cordata*, a yellow with a hint of chartreuse. It would be a perfect tree if the Japanese beetles didn’t congregate in its upper reaches. But we are not destined for perfection: it is still a sweetheart of a tree.

Another favorite is the cutleaf maple – so colorful it saves a trip to the mountains. Mine was a former 6-inch seedling so its lineage is obscure but it is a charming small tree. Another small tree now losing its leaves and revealing red berries is the deciduous holly, *Ilex verticillata*, the winterberry. The wealth of red berries depends upon its bloom time coinciding with that of a male in the neighborhood. This year there are berries!

For great fall color plant the maple leaf *Viburnum*, *V. acerfolium* that has deep red, orange, and purple leaves. This native also answers to the name ‘possumhaw’ and is a valuable addition to a woodland garden. Equally colorful in November is the oakleaf *Hydrangea*, *H. quercifolia*. It is a deciduous, mound-forming shrub with interestingly peeling orange/brown bark. The leaves, as expected, are large and deeply lobed, bronze/purple and still topped by skeleton flowers.

It is not just the planted varieties that are a delight but also the volunteers such as the *Rhus* species, the native sumacs. They won’t do in a tidy perennial bed of course but they provide a gaudy quilt along a county lane. Also native, the neatly shaped sweetshrub, *Calycanthus floridus* is a shiny yellow before it melts into the background.

Nandina and *Berberis* are increasingly frowned on because they tend to self-seed promiscuously but they are colorful for months even if wanton. If you are planting for fall color, consider grasses. Theirs is a subtle palette but a perfect counterpoint to

brighter hues, doubly delicious with aster blues and chrysanthemum pinks tangled with them.

This fall, in my ditch I met a charming native, *Andropogon ternarius*, split-beard blue stem. Don't you love that name? I had no idea what it was, couldn't find it in my wilder books so sent it to Mary Hyde Berg who knows about these things. She consulted with Helen Hamilton, fellow native-plant person and it is now titled! I am so grateful that it has an identity. Thank you ladies. Green leaves clasping a red stem give it a striped appearance and the paired tufts on top have a rakish bunny look. I hope it makes itself at home.