

November 15, 2017



FALL COLORS
by Sue McDavid
UCCE Master Gardener of El Dorado County

Every year I think the fall leaf colors are beautiful, but this year they are particularly spectacular. Many people think cooler weather is behind changing leaf color, but it is actually determined by a combination of environmental conditions and genetic predisposition. In other words, if a shrub or tree does not have the basic chemistry to produce colorful leaves in the fall, nothing a gardener does will change that. Horticulturists spend a lot of time breeding and selecting plant varieties for fall color, but even the most colorful clone will not perform well if conditions are not right.

Leaf color changes are triggered by a combination of shortening day length and cooler temperatures, neither of which we gardeners can control. Day length, of course, is a known factor, but early cool spells can also mean an early color season. These changes in light and temperature shut down the interface between the leaf and the rest of the plant. The green pigment, chlorophyll, which is the essential ingredient in a plant's ability to turn sunlight into stored energy, begins to break down, revealing other pigments which have been there all along. These pigments include carotenoids (the same type of chemical that makes carrots orange) and xanthophylls (which simply means "leaf yellow"). Anthocyanin is produced by trees and shrubs which manufacture a great deal of sugar, like some maples, and is responsible for the brilliant reds of early autumn.

As anthocyanin breaks down, it reveals still more color in the dying leaf. Drought tends to reduce the amount of sugar a plant produces, which reduces the amount of anthocyanin and results in a duller fall. It's a complicated equation though and fall color predictions are notoriously inaccurate. Just ask someone who planned a trip to the East Coast on an exact date to see the fall colors and ended up being disappointed.

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If planning for fall color in your own landscape, browsing through local nurseries right now or just touring El Dorado County will give you a good idea of what to plant for spectacular color. Dogwoods, Crape Myrtles, Redbuds, Chinese Pistache, and Japanese Maples immediately come to mind when thinking of fall color, but the list could go on and on. Do some research and drive around – you will see several varieties of trees that are good fall performers.

One of the last public education classes of the year will be “Gardening in the Foothills” with Master Gardener Steve Savage on November 18 at the Government Center Hearing Room, Bldg C in Placerville. This free class will be 9:00 a.m. – noon.

UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512). Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at [http://ucanr.edu/mastergardener e-news](http://ucanr.edu/mastergardener-e-news). You can also find us on Facebook.