

NATURE'S AUTUMN COLOR SHOW IN THE LAKE WEDOWEE AREA

By

Don C. East

In an earlier issue of our newsletter, I submitted a sketch of Mother Nature's springtime color show. In this issue, I would like to bring you an insight into the second act of nature's color show in our beautiful region of the state. Like in the spring show, the autumn color show is a combination of wildflowers and deciduous tree/shrub foliage. The deciduous tree/shrub color can largely be seen from the lake itself. However, most of the autumn wildflowers can only be seen on some of the creeks flowing through the area. These creeks are Fox, Hatchet, Hillabee, Crooked, Ketchepedrakee, Wedowee, Mad Indian, etc. The bottom line is: if you really want to appreciate nature's autumn color in this region, you must go stomping around the woods along these creeks. Like the spring color shows, the autumn ones also vary from year to year in their intensity. Generally speaking, if we have a sufficient amount of early autumn rain and a couple of hard, early frosts, a more colorful display will result.

Although autumn does not officially begin until late September, the areas first autumn colors start in Mid and late August when the Turk Cap Lilies (orange and black), Passion Flowers or "May Pops" as we locals call them (purple and yellow), Sumac (reddish brown) and Queen Anne's Lace (white) bloom. It is also at this time the first crimson foliage colors of the Sassafras, Sumac, Sourwood and Black Gum appear.

By the first week in September, the Flowering Dogwood leaves are starting to show red color. At about this same time, the wildflowers intensify their bloom with the Cardinal Flowers (red), Indian Paint Brush (red and white), and Swamp Lilies (white). As mid-September rolls around, the Joe Pye Weed (purple), Iron Weed (purple), Thistle (purple), Steeple Bush (purple), Trumpet Creeper (orange), and the second crop of Dandelion (yellow) begin their blooms. By late September, some of the major hardwood trees are beginning to show some color. The Poplars and Sweet Gums are usually the first to do so with their yellows and reds respectively. The Witch hazel is also beginning to put on its yellow blooms. Also, wildflowers such as the Golden Rods (yellow), Flea Bane (white and pink varieties), Astors (white and purple varieties), Yarrow (white), and Black-Eye Susan's (yellow with a chocolate center) put on colors. This is also the time to look for the delicious Paw Paw fruits, which turn a yellowish-green when ripe.

When October rolls around, other major hardwood foliage begins to show their colors. Among the Oak family, the White Oaks (White Oak, Post Oak, Swamp White Oak, Chestnut Oak, Chinquapin Oak, and Over Cup Oak) usually take on color first. These are followed by members of the Red Oak group (Northern and Southern Red Oak, Cherry Bark Oak, Scarlet Oak, Shumard Oak and Black Oak). The leaf colors on these oak trees vary from yellow to bright scarlet according to the specific variety. Mother Nature produces this color show in our hardwoods through the use of autumn's shorter days and cooler temperatures. These factors make the amount of chlorophyll in the leaves decline. The Chlorophyll is what gives the leaves their green color. By contrast, the red, yellow and orange pigment in the leaves is enhanced. The leaves of Hickory, Birch, Ash, Poplar and Sycamore trees are loaded with yellow pigment. On the other hand, Oaks, Sourwood, Black Gum, Maples, and Sumac also carry a predominant red pigment. The best weather for hardwood leaf color is to have sunny days followed by cool

nights below 45 degrees, but not below freezing. On the other hand, rainy or cloudy days near peak color, reduces their color intensity. By now the Dogwood's leaves are almost all red and the Red Buckeye fruits are beginning to fall out of their covers. According to the Creek Indian legend (and adopted by the early white settlers), if you collect some of these Buckeye nuts and keep one in your pocket (or purse), you will have good luck. This is also the time of the year that residents of the area begin to see early morning fog form on the lake and local creeks. This fog is caused by the temperature differential between the water and air. By mid-October, the White Oak and Chestnut Oak acorns are the first of the hard mast crop to fall, and the leaves of the Hickory trees (Butternut, Pignut, Mockernut, and Shagbark) start to put on their yellow and orange hues. Other trees and shrubs also begin their color show at this time, such as the High Bush Blueberries (red), Oak Leaf Hydrangeas (reddish purple), and Serviceberry (orange). Joining the wildflower bloom at this time are the Boneset (white), Camphor Weed (yellow), and Strawberry Bush (orange and red). The Strawberry Bush blooms are rarely seen by even local residents because the deer quickly locate and eat them as they bloom out. The last week in October usually brings our first frosts, therefore accelerating the onset of the color show. Before the month is over, we will probably scrape the season's first ice off the car's windshield in the morning, and by now the morning fog will be almost a daily occurrence. Peak foliage usually occurs on the last couple of days of October, but can be as early as 20 October and as late as the first week in November, depending on the preceding climatological conditions. This time of the year always brings to mind the first verse of Joyce Kilmer's poem "Trees" – I think that I shall never see a poem as lovely as a tree."

November opens with the maximum autumn color as the foliage is at peak and many wildflowers are still in bloom. Aside from the primary deciduous leaf trees already mentioned, there are many others that contribute to the Autumn color in our area; such as River Birch, Ironweed, Beech, Elm, Eastern Redbud, Sycamore, Hawthorne, Black Cherry, Black Locust, Box Elder, Persimmon, Ash (White and Green), Catawba, Royal Paulownia, Black Walnut, Honey Locust, and White Basswood. Also, we should not forget the bright greens that the Pine family provides as a backdrop for the autumn colors. We are blessed to have the Longleaf, Shortleaf, Virginia and Loblolly Pines around Lake Wedowee. Their bright greens add a special dimension and contrast to the deciduous trees and wildflower colors during the autumn. Many of the leaves that peaked out earlier are already starting to cover the forest floor as Lake Wedowee residents get out their rakes and leaf blowers. Mother Nature takes care of its own leaf problem each year by sending a strong weather front through our area just after peak foliage. The high winds and rain associated with these fronts remove most of the leaves from the trees. This is usually followed shortly by our first hard freeze of the season. But the color show is not entirely over, because as mid-Novembers rolls around, we find the Maples (Red and Norway) have saved their brilliant yellows and scarlets for last.

Other than the Holly and Winterberry Bush's bright red berries and the deep blue/purple of the Closed Gentians, Mother Nature's autumn color show on the lake is over. It is now time for us humans residents of the lake to try our hand at putting on a color show of sorts. Some of us do this by breaking out our gaudy camouflage gear for deer season. Many others don their crimson and white or orange and navy blue school colors in preparation for the "big game." Try as we might though, we can not compete with those colors that nature has just provided, because as Joyce Kilmer's stated in his poem – "Only God can make a tree!"