

Fall fire

By Linda Roe

Fall has always been my favorite time of year. The weather is good (usually) and the tomatoes get ripe (finally). It's fun to be out in the garden this time of year, weeding and planting spring bulbs, while flowers turn to seeds and green leaves turn to fall fire.

The first foliage to turn is the native vine maple in the greenbelt behind my house. By mid-August, red appears in the leaves, signaling the beginning of fall. Plant any maple and you will add some fall fire to your garden. Red maples are fairly large and are often planted as street trees. The fall foliage is a good, clear red. Other large maple hybrids, such as Pacific Sunset, have leaves that turn orange, yellow and red.

Don't have room for a large tree? Try a Japanese maple for fall color. They're turning right now, so it's a good time to pick one out. Take a look at the coral bark maple, which has a lime green color in the summer, golden color in the fall and red stems in the winter. The commonly planted weepy laceleaf maple offers a bright mound of orange.

Looking for something a little different? Seek out the fernleaf full moon maple, which has red and orange streaking through the

green, lacy foliage. My favorite maple in my garden is the small paperbark maple. Its leaves are a beautiful red color in the fall, with cinnamon-colored peeling bark in the winter.

There are other great trees for fall flames. Ginkgo trees are planted for the bright golden color of their unusual wing-shaped leaves. They get large, but not very fast. Katsura trees have golden apricot leaves that smell like cotton candy. My favorite flowering tree of all is the sourwood tree. It has red new growth and it flowers in late summer. As it finishes flowering, the leaves begin to change to a fabulous bright red. It's a slow grower and is somewhat hard to locate.

In a very small yard, a shrub can stand in for a tree, serving as a focal point for the garden or as a privacy screen. Choose one for fall color and you will get at least two seasons of visual excitement. Viburnums are great for this purpose. They have beautiful, showy flowers in the spring, attractive green foliage in the summer and burgundy color that lasts a long time in the fall. The native serviceberry (amelanchier) has white spring flowers and orange fall foliage. Enkianthus, a lesser-known member the rhododendron family, has dainty bell-like flowers in the spring and red color the fall. Some shrubs are grown for their beautiful foliage, and two of the more popular ones have good fall color also. Burgundy-leaved barberries turn orange and red in the fall, while the smoke tree turns yellow to orange-red.



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Look ahead to winter and plant a witch hazel. Not only do they have winter flowers in yellow, orange and red, they also offer fall fire in the same colors. Husky fans will like the beautyberry (callicarpa), its berries turning “Dawg” purple and its foliage golden, just in time for football season. You won't find it in my yard; I'm a Cougar.

Sometimes overlooked in the fire of fall are the perennials. Grown for the flowers some also have nice fall color. Check out the peonies. Many of them turn red, orange or yellow before going into dormancy. Ornamental grasses, often picked for their showy plumes, can have nice color change, too. Japanese forest grass blades turn shades of pink, while

miscanthus blades turn from orange to burgundy before going dormant.

Whatever you choose, some years will be great for your fall fire, some, not so much. Sunny days and cold nights destroy the chlorophyll, the energy-converting powerhouse inside the leaf that makes the leaf green. When the green is gone, the other pigments in the leaf are then visible. Stress on a plant, especially water stress, will also cause color change. In a mild, wet fall, the leaves still lose the chlorophyll; they just don't turn color. Don't be disappointed when the rain puts out the flames — there's always next year. ■

— *Information courtesy of Wight's Home & Garden*