



Trident Maple

Plant an Awesome Autumn: Trees for Fall Color

*'The best time to plant
a tree was 20 years ago.
The next best time is now.'*
– Chinese Proverb

Paperbark Maple



Story & Photography By Scott A. Zanon

Autumn is the time for football and to relish the most beautiful of our four seasons. Many trees have been waiting to show off their foliage. One of the great things about living where we do is the ever-changing seasons. For a few weeks, nature puts on one of its most spectacular displays as trees complete the growing season in a brilliant display of fall colors.

Fall color is controlled by both the plant's genetic factors and the environment, not Jack Frost. Carotene and xanthophyll (carotenoids) are yellow pigments produced in foliage all year along with chlorophyll, the green pigment. In autumn, when short days and cool temperatures slow down the production of chlorophyll, the remaining chlorophyll breaks down and disappears. The yellow pigments that have been masked by chlorophyll then show up and give certain trees their yellow and golden colors.

Some plants produce anthocyanins (red and purple pigments) that may mask the yellow pigments. Anthocyanin production increases with increased sugars in the leaves. A fall season with sunny days and cool nights increases the sugar content of the leaves and intensifies autumn red hues.

The combination of carotenoid and anthocyanin pigments produces the orange colors in trees.

The tans and browns of oaks are caused by tannins, which accumulate as the chlorophyll disappears. Fall color starts in September and ends in November. Frost and freezing temperatures will stop the coloration process and blacken the leaves.

Some of you may ask, "Why are tree fall colors more intense some years?" Cool night temperatures for an extended period below 45 F but above freezing helps develop more anthocyanins in the leaves, bringing out more intense fall colors in trees. Sunny days allow the leaves to trap the sugars from the dwindling chlorophyll, thus creating the spectacle of fall colors. Calm days help enhance the viewing time and duration of fall foliage.

Here is a list of my recommendations of trees with great fall color to consider. Many also have features that merit use year round in the garden. Some are common, others are not, but all are worth the search for that autumnal glow.

Trident maple (*Acer buergerianum*)

Zones: 5-9

Size: 20-30 feet tall and wide

Fall Color: Yellow-orange-red, but late and at times variable

Recommended Cultivar: Aeryn ('ABMTF')

Paperbark maple (*A. griseum*)

Zones: 4-8

Size: 20-30 feet tall by 15 feet wide

Fall Color: Bronze-red; late, often October and November

Red maple (aka swamp maple) (*A. rubrum*)

Zones: 3-9

Size: 70 feet tall by 40 feet wide; cultivars are smaller

Fall Color: Green-yellow to yellow to red; cultivars are best for dazzling orange-red fall color
Recommended Cultivars: Autumn Flame ('Pete's Red'), 'Autumn Spire', Red Sunset ('Franksred'), 'October Glory' and 'Red Rocket'

Sugar maple (aka hard maple; rock maple) (*A. saccharum*)

Zones: 3-8

Size: 60-80 feet tall by 40 feet wide

Fall Color: Yellow-orange-red and striking
Recommended Cultivars: Adirondack ('Adirzam'), Fall Fiesta ('Bailsta') and 'Green Mountain'



Katsuratree



Ginkgo

Serviceberry (aka juneberry, sarvisberry, saskatoon, shadblow, shadbush)

(*Amelanchier* spp.)

Zones: 4-9

Size: 6-30 feet tall by 4-10 feet wide; cultivars 12 feet tall by 10 feet wide

Fall Color: Yellow to orange to red in October often in spectacular fashion

Recommended Cultivars/Species: Rainbow Pillar (*A. canadensis* 'Glen Form'), *A. x grandiflora* 'Autumn Brilliance', *A. laevis* 'Cumulus' and juneberry (*A. lamarckii*)

Common pawpaw (aka custard apple)

(*Asimina triloba*)

Zones: 5-9

Size: 15-20 feet tall and wide

Fall Color: Yellow

Katsuratree (*Cercidiphyllum japonicum*)

Zones: 4-8

Size: 40-50 feet tall and wide

Fall Color: Varying from yellow to apricot to occasionally orange-red; leaves release a warm and spicy fragrance, reminiscent of cotton candy

Recommended Cultivars: 'Morioka Weeping' and Red Fox ('Rotfuchs')

Kousa dogwood (aka Chinese dogwood)

(*Cornus kousa*)

Zones: 5-8

Size: 20-25 feet tall and wide

Fall Color: Burgundy in late autumn

Recommended Cultivars: Samaritan ('Samzam') and 'Wolf Eyes'

Ginkgo (aka maidenhair tree) (*Ginkgo biloba*)

Zones: 4-9

Size: 60-80 feet tall by 40-60 feet wide

Fall Color: Golden yellow in November

Recommended Cultivars: 'Autumn Gold' and Presidential Gold ('The President')

American sweetgum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*)

Zones: 5-9

Size: 60-75 feet tall by 40 feet wide

Fall Color: Yellow-orange-red-purple

Note: I am not a fan of this tree, other than its excellent fall color, because of the messy fruit

Dawn redwood (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*)

Zones: 5-8

Size: 70 feet tall by 25 feet wide

Fall Color: Cinnamon brown

Recommended Cultivars: 'Ogon', synonyms 'Golden Oji' and 'Gold Rush'



Black Tupelo

Black tupelo (aka black gum, sour gum)
(*Nyssa sylvatica*)

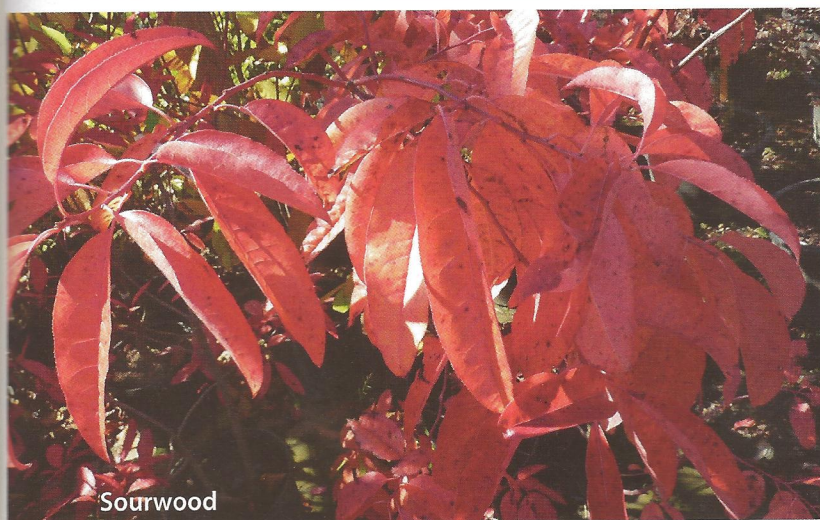
Zones: 4-9
Size: 30-50 feet tall by 20-30 feet wide
Fall Color: Outstanding fluorescent yellow, orange, scarlet and purple
Recommended cultivars: 'Tupelo Tower' and 'Wildfire'

Sourwood (aka lily-of-the-valley tree; sorrel tree) (*Oxydendrum arboreum*)

Zones: 5-9
Size: 25 feet tall and 20 feet wide; 50 to 75 feet in the wild
Fall Color: Yellow-orange and red-purple

Persian parrotia (aka Persian ironwood)
(*Parrotia persica*)

Zones: 4-8
Size: 30 feet tall by 20 feet wide
Fall Color: Beautiful yellow to orange to scarlet colors when exposed to full sun



Sourwood

Sawtooth oak (*Quercus acutissima*)

Zones: 5-8
Size: 40-50 feet tall and wide
Fall Color: Clear yellow to golden yellow in November

Shumard oak (*Q. shumardii*)

Zones: 5-9
Size: 50 feet tall and wide; 100 feet tall in nature
Fall Color: Russet red to red; sometimes outstanding

Common sassafras (*Sassafras albidum*)

Zones: 4-8
Size: 30-60 feet tall by 25-40 feet wide
Fall Color: Yellow-orange-red in October; spectacular

Japanese stewartia (*Stewartia pseudocamellia*)

Zones: 5-7
Size: 25-40 feet tall and 10-20 feet wide
Fall Color: Orange to red with occasional hues of red-purple

Common baldcypress (*Taxodium distichum*)

Zones: 4-9
Size: 50-70 feet tall by 20-30 feet wide
Fall Color: Russet-orange-bronze

'Frontier' elm (*Ulmus 'Frontier'*)

Zones: 5-8
Size: 40 feet tall by 30 feet wide
Fall Color: Red-purple-burgundy



Frontier Elm

Scott Zanon is the author of *Landscaping with Trees in the Midwest: A Guide for Residential and Commercial Properties*. It was released in July by Ohio University/Swallow Press.