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Falling Leaves, Changing Colors

It is that time of year again! With the shortening of the daylight period, trees are responding with their annual color show. It isn't just trees, though. The landscape can be full of color as the days grow shorter. We mostly associate fall color with trees and shrubs and for good reason! When trees start to go dormant and no longer need to photosynthesize, they lose the green and start to show their true colors. The process starts with forming an abscission layer at the base of the leaf, which will later help it shed. Then, the plant will begin turning the chlorophyll back into useful nutrients for winter dormancy. What's left behind are chemicals categorized as carotenoids: xanthophyll is typically responsible for the yellow color; carotene is responsible for orange. As the process continues, plants will start to develop additional sugars that are trapped in the leaves. These turn into anthocyanins, which lead to red and purple pigments. Not every plant will produce every pigment, which is why some trees won't turn purple. Also, depending on how harsh the summer or fall freezes are, the plants might not have time to show the full range of colors.

Some things to look for in the landscape include trees, of course, but there are many other colorful options in the garden before winter. Here are some breakdowns of the plants that provide color. Red will come from leaves and flowers alike; sugar and red maples, red and pin oaks, burning bush, mums, and pansies can all provide red. You will also likely see red sumac leaves along the highway or in the landscape if you've chosen to plant staghorn sumac. Purple is a bit more uncommon, though you will see it in flowers; Mums and asters, smoke tree, pansies, and some oak and maple can turn purple. Yellow is more common and is one of the first things seen in the yard or garden; Ash, honey locust, and ginkgo trees, as well as blue star foliage and goldenrod flowers, and mums of course. In this transitional season, there are many exciting changes to the landscape. Keep your eyes peeled for vibrant color!

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