

## Trees and Shrubs for Fall Color and More



Last year our trees and shrubs put on a spectacular autumn display. How did this year's foliage compare? While some trees were absolutely stunning, this wasn't a banner year. Unfortunately, many of our beech trees have succumbed to Beech Leaf Disease, (BLD). Early in the season, many beech trees exhibited signs of crinkled leaves and dead buds. According to the CT Agricultural Experiment Station (CAES), BLD is a serious threat to American beech trees as well as introduced species.

Also, many of our sugar maples dropped their leaves early, likely caused by a fungus from a very wet season. Thankfully, this is considered more aesthetic than life-threatening unless a tree is newly planted or weakened by stress. Despite these issues, many of our trees had magnificent color. Red and striped maples, birch, tulip, sassafras, witch-hazel, American hornbeam, flowering dogwood and sweet gum were standouts this fall.

Even in a so-so year, if we include a variety of trees and shrubs in our landscapes, we can always be assured of some wonderful fall color. It's important to note that certain colors are characteristic of a tree's genus or plant group. For example, Oaks, genus *Quercus*, turn a red or russet color. Similarly, Dogwoods turn purplish-red while Sourwood and Black Tupelo are more crimson. If golden yellow is your preference, you might choose Aspen, Yellow Poplar or Witch-hazel. And for a golden bronze color, a good choice is Hickory. Maples, however, don't play by the rules. Their leaf color varies by species or type of maple. So, whereas a Red Maple turns a brilliant scarlet color, a Sugar Maple's color is an orange-red.

Some of our top picks for color are also considered **keystone plants** for their importance to local food webs. These trees, not only beautiful, are the very backbone of local ecosystems, provide for creatures large and small.

### Acorns & Nuts

**White Oak** *Quercus alba* - Oaks are at the top of the list for supporting caterpillars and birds. And the acorns they produce provide food for a variety of wildlife species. **Shagbark Hickory** *Carya ovata* has stunning golden leaves and produces sweet edible nuts that are also an important food source for many animals. **Eastern Black Walnut** *Juglans nigra* turns a beautiful shade of bright yellow. Large edible nuts feed many animal and bird species.

### Seeds, Berries & Shelter

**Red Maple** *Acer rubrum* is one of the earliest trees to turn with impressive red coloring and, on occasion, turning orange to break its own rule. **Hazel Alder/Smooth Alder** *Alnus serrulate* is a small tree or shrub that provides shelter for many wildlife species. Yellow-brown in fall, birds also favor its seeds. **Flowering Dogwood** *Benthamidia florida* is not only an attractive ornamental tree, but also provides shelter and nesting sites for many bird species. Clusters of red berries produced in fall are favored by birds. **Serviceberry** *Amelanchier canadensis* produces purple berry-like droops that attract birds and other wildlife. Leaves turn a showy orange to red. **Sassafras** *S. albidum* color

offers a variety of shades of red, orange, and yellow. Truly stunning in the autumn months, it also provides food and shelter to a wide array of wildlife species. **Yellow Birch** *Betula alleghaniensis*, a gorgeous orange-yellow in fall, also has attractive peeling amber-colored bark. And, last but not least, **Bigtooth Aspen** *Populus grandidentata* with strikingly beautiful gold and yellow foliage is home to many birds and animals.

There are also many attractive **shrubs** that display amazing fall color and providing wildlife with berries and shelter. They include Fragrant Sumac, Chokeberry, Blueberry and many Viburnum species.

There is much to consider when selecting a tree or shrub for your landscape: size, form, soil, moisture, light and, of course, beauty. But with increasing loss of natural places and wildlife that depends on them, our landscapes must also function to support healthy ecosystems. The fact that these plants provide amazing color is just the icing on the cake.