

by J. Lawrence Smith

Splendor of Autumn Color

The array of colors on the trees during autumn is something that we have experienced for so many years that we take this wonder for granted! There is pumpkin orange of sugar maple, crimson of red maple, gold of quaking aspen and russet of white oak. The shedding of leaves by the trees has given us our familiar name for the season--fall.

Few areas of the earth have anything quite like the annual display of color in eastern North America. In the Northern Hemisphere, only western Europe and eastern Asia have anything comparable to our fall colors.

Our forest trees are the descendants of a large number of ancient trees that existed throughout the higher latitudes of the earth ages ago. Fossil leaves of sycamore-like trees have been found in Greenland near the icecap that blankets the island.

During the Pleistocene or Ice Age, the southern Appalachians became a refuge for a large number of tree species. In Europe, many plants confronted the barrier of the Pyrennes and Alps and died out. Today there are 125 different trees in our southern mountains which is nearly 50 more than all of Europe.

The yellow of hickory, beech, yellow poplar and birch is due to pigments in the leaves at all times, but is hidden by the green of chlorophyll during the summer. When the chlorophyll begins to break down with the chill of autumn the pigment is revealed.

The bright red of trees such as the red maple, certain oaks and gum is produced by the addition of tinted sap to the leaves. The presence of sugar in the sap aids in producing the bright orange color.

The expression "Indian summer" comes from the early days on the frontier when the Indians often made their last raids on the settlements during a time of warm weather late in autumn. What is now a time of enjoyment for us before winter was often a time of uncertainty for the pioneers.

Fall is also the season when many wild fruits and berries become ripe. From lower elevations where pawpaws and persimmons will be found to mountain ash and highbush cranberry at high elevations, there a wide variety for both wildlife and people!

Colors on the trees always seem brighter in the mountain especially when trees such as sugar and red maple are set before a background of red spruce in the land of Blackwater.

Soon only the deep green of the spruce remains as the others turn down the flame of the year by shedding their leaves.
