

BEAUTY OF THE FALL SEASON IS BRIEF, BUT HARD TO DENY

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By the time you read this the peak of color for fall foliage should be past. If the experts are right, it should have been spectacular.

An article in the Iowa State University Extension Department publication by Jeff Iles reported, "Wet, cloudy, warm weather or very low temps in early fall tend to mute the much-anticipated autumnal display". We avoided most of the above factors except the warm weather.

I have noticed unusually premature loss of many leaves due, perhaps, to the unseasonably dry weather. How that may affect the overall coloration remains to be seen. We should know by the time you read this.

It's a tossup for me as to which is my favorite season- spring or fall. The lack of pesky insects in both seasons is a contributing factor and ditto for extreme high and low temperatures. In spite of its being a harbinger of winter, which has become the least appreciated season in my advanced years, my vote has to go for fall. Its sheer beauty, as brief as it is, is hard to deny.

The transition favoring the fall of leaves causes certain cells near the lower end of the petiole (stem) to become meristematic and produce a zone of delicate, thin-walled cells extending across the base of the petiole. This is called the abscission layer.

Each tree species has its distinct color phases that make them easier to identify from a distance. Foresters utilize this trait when inventorying timber stands with aerial photography.

Many of the fruits, nuts, and seeds produced by hardwood trees are utilized by wildlife as food. The oaks with over 70 species of North American hardwoods provide the bulk of wildlife forage for several species of animals and birds.

White oak acorns are preferred over those of the red oaks because they are much sweeter. Humans and wildlife used acorns of both species for food. Native Americans used several fruits and nuts from hardwoods as food. Most matured and were available in the fall. Among them were beech, black and chokecherry, hickory, paw paw, persimmon and American chestnut.

American chestnut once covered over 70 percent of eastern forests up to 1904. It was an important timber and mast source. A blight imported from Europe introduced a fungus that effectively wiped out mature trees. It is found today mostly in the form of sprouts that usually die off before reaching maturity.

We found two trees in a woodlot near the shores of Oneida Lake in a timber sale we marked last summer. They both measured 14 inches diameter breast high and the burrs yielded a handful of viable nuts and at least one I know of produced a healthy seedling. Those and several others are being monitored in hopes of producing a strain of disease resistant trees.

Our American beech is suffering a nearly similar fate with very close consequences. They become afflicted in the later sapling stage and few are making it to maturity. It was once the most important western Adirondack wildlife food source, but present day supplies are limited and sporadic.

I have noted with interest over the years that the browsers, those animals that eat the twigs and foliage, do not browse on those species whose fruits, nuts or seeds they eat. Is this nature's way of insuring a continuing supply of food?

A friend of mine made an interesting observation while sitting on deer watch one fall. He noticed a fisher working its way toward him, but was unable to determine what was holding its interest until it got nearer. It was feeding on beechnuts – interesting behavior for such a dedicated carnivore.