Fall Color for Coastal Landscapes

While the coastal southeast may not be as well known for beautiful autumn foliage as other parts of the country, it is possible to have stunning fall color in local landscapes if you choose the right plants. In our area, fall color usually peaks in November, but often extends into December in mild years. Following are some of my favorite reliable performers to bring fall color to Cape Fear landscapes.

Trees with great fall color really give you the most bang for your buck because of their large size. If you are in need of an incredibly tough, beautiful, large tree with stunning fall color look no further than Ginkgo (Ginkgo biloba). This prehistoric tree is a reliable landscape performer, thriving in full sun and well drained soil. Once established, Ginkgo trees are very drought tolerant and also very tolerant of tough, urban conditions. Ginkgos eventually reach 50’ or more in height and up to 40’ in width. Each fall their distinct fan shaped leaves turn brilliantly gold before falling to the ground with the first hard frost. When purchasing Ginkgo, choose only named male varieties, such as ‘Autumn Gold’ or ‘Shangri-la’, because female varieties produce messy, malodorous fruits.

For less harsh conditions, consider Red Maple (Acer rubrum). Many named varieties of Red Maple are available, but not all color reliably in the south. While color intensity will vary from year to year based on weather conditions, the varieties ‘October Glory’, ‘Red Sunset’, ‘Sun Valley’ and ‘Brandywine’ are reliable autumn color producers in our area. Red Maples grow best in full sun and moist soil, reaching 40’ to 50’ in height and slightly less in spread. Though often planted on tough sites, Red Maple is not tolerant of dry, sandy soils or high pH and will rapidly decline in these conditions.

If you need a smaller tree with spectacular fall color try one of the many varieties of Japanese Maple (Acer palmatum). These elegant small trees are frequently planted as specimens or accent plants and are truly beautiful year round. Japanese Maples prefer evenly moist, well drained soils that have been heavily amended and light afternoon shade. For something a little tougher consider the ever popular Crape Myrtle. While often planted for their showy summer flowers, some varieties also produce excellent fall color. One of the best for fall color is ‘Sioux’, a smaller variety growing 15’ to 20’ with bright pink flowers in summer. There are many shrubs with fall interest that thrive in the coastal southeast. ‘Mt. Airy’ Fothergilla is personal favorite, producing spectacular fall color in shades of gold, orange, red, and wine, on medium size, 5’ tall, bushy shrubs. Fothergillas grow well in moist to well drained soil and sun to part shade. In spring, honey scented, bottlebrush spikes of white flowers emerge before the new leaves. Another favorite for fall color is Virginia Sweetspire (Itea virginica). The foliage of this arching, native shrub turns deep shades of burgundy and wine in fall and often remains on the plant until Christmas. Well known for its tolerance of wet soils, Virginia Sweetspire, makes a wonderful shrub for poorly drained sites or by the water’s edge. Itea will also grow well in average garden soils, but is not a good choice for poor sandy sites. Fall color is most intense in full sun, though this shrub is equally happy in part shade.

Learn more about these and many other plants from the Plant Fact Sheets available from NCSU’s Urban Horticulture website, www.ncstate-plants.net. Get suggestions for more varieties that thrive in our area from the ‘Recommended Plants’ fact sheets available online at http://pender.ces.ncsu.edu/ - click on the ‘Lawn & Garden’ link and scroll down to access lists of recommended plants for our area.

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Fall Isn’t for Planting?

I’ve been telling you for years that the cooler days and nights of autumn are a great time to plant trees and shrubs in our mild climate. Plants aren’t stressed as much and have a chance to develop a better root system before the heat and humidity of another southern summer arrives. Well, all that’s true for most plants. But, there are some selections of my favorite group of summer-flowering plants – crape myrtle – that are better planted in late winter and early spring.

You’ve heard about the group of hybrid crape myrtles that were developed at the National Arboretum in Washington, D.C. that have good powdery mildew resistance. They all have Indian (Native American if you want to use the p.c. term) tribe names and have taken over the nursery trade. Early releases include the white ‘Natchez’, lavender-pink ‘Muskogee’ and the light pink ‘Biloxi’. The latest release is the almost-red ‘Arapahoe’. Many have gorgeous bark, interesting form and long-term flowering through the heat of our summers. But, there is a problem with several varieties when they are dug and moved balled-and-burlapped in the fall.

I experienced this almost twenty years ago when I was working for Cooperative Extension in Greenville, N.C. A landscape contractor had purchased large ‘Natchez’ crape myrtles from a local field-grown nursery to anchor the new landscape of a renovated McDonald’s fast-food restaurant. They were planted in November and everything looked great until spring when several didn’t leaf out. The stems were still green but they had no leaves. We did a lot of collective head-scratching but never came up with a satisfactory explanation as to what had happened. The nursery replaced the plants and the folks at N.C. State started digging into the problem.

After expending lots of energy and brain power on this issue, the conclusion was that some selections that include the Lagerstroemia fauriei parent (the part of the hybrid that gives us the powdery mildew resistance) lose too much water from the severed roots when the plants are dug in the fall. The problem is even worse if the root balls are allowed to dry out before replanting or if water is limiting after planting. If the plants are exposed to very cold temperatures (below 20 degrees F.) before they make it back into the ground, problems will be magnified. As you might expect larger plants are more susceptible than smaller ones.

The white selection ‘Natchez’ and the two varieties of the straight species (not hybrid) Lagerstroemia fauriei – ‘Fantasy’ and ‘Townhouse’ – are most problematic when moved as large plants in the fall. A nursery grower friend of mine told me recently that they have stopped planting ‘Fantasy’ because they have had more problems with it than ‘Townhouse’. I have also seen problems with the pink selection ‘Miami’, but it doesn’t appear as consistently as the others.

If you plan to move large ‘Natchez’, ‘Fantasy’ or ‘Townhouse’, the safest bet is to dig them in late winter – February/March – rather than in the fall. That doesn’t mean you won’t ever have success with a fall transplanting, but it is riskier for these particular crape myrtles.

Timely Tips

It’s too late—Fall fertilization in SE North Carolina is not a good idea. Nitrogen and other minerals will either be lost to leaching or will cause the plant to wake up prematurely resulting in winter damage. Wait until spring to fertilize.

Applications of fungicides at this time will not be very effective at controlling large patch. The grass is going dormant and will not be able to absorb the fungicide that will protect it from infection.

Now is the time—Submit soil tests to NCDA soon before the farmers create a backlog at the soil testing lab. Current processing times are about 1 week, but that will turn into 2 months later this winter.

Once you get your soil test back, apply lime or sulfur as needed to bring soil pH into the recommended range. Lime or sulfur can be applied any time of year because they do not leach out of the soil and they do not cause unwanted growth.

Apply atrazine or simazine to all warm season turf types in November and/or December for cost effective control of winter weeds.

Not yet—Hold off on major pruning until late winter. Pruning in the fall may encourage unwanted growth and creates a wound as the plant is entering the stress of winter. Pruning damaged or diseased branches can be done at any time.
Horticultural Oil in the Landscape

John Wooldridge, Commercial Horticulture Agent

The dormant season is the traditional time to apply horticultural oil for control of troublesome landscape pests, however modern oils are safe to use at any time of year. The use of oils started sometime after World War II and were known as dormant oils because they contained impurities that would burn plants when used during the growing season. Starting about 20 years ago those impurities were greatly reduced in dormant oils, but some of the old terminology remains. In addition to “dormant,” terms you may see on an oil label include “summer,” “supreme,” “superior,” “foliar,” and “narrow range.” All those terms relate to the physical properties of the oil (viscosity, purity, distillation temperature), but the properties of horticultural oils on the market today are pretty similar. Almost all are safe to use at any time of year provided you follow the label directions.

That said, horticultural oils can still injure plants in certain situations, and labeled rates for summer applications typically are lower than dormant applications. Situations that can lead to plant injury include drought stress, high temperatures, high humidity, direct sunlight, application to new succulent growth, and application to growth that is not hardened off for winter. Combining oil applications with pesticides containing sulfur (like Captan) can cause injury. Additionally some plants (maples, redbuds, and others) are more sensitive to injury from oil than others. Obviously, considering those factors, a dormant application will have less danger of causing injury. However, the truth is horticulture oils are probably not as effective when applied in winter because most insects are not as active in winter. That does not mean you should not use oil in winter, just know that you are not killing as many pests. The benefit to dormant applications is there is less chance of plant injury.

Horticultural oil is an outstanding tool for landscape pest control because its mode of action is more physical than chemical. It smothers insects and disrupts respiration. This means it is very safe for people and very unlikely that insects will develop resistance as they might against a biochemical pesticide. If an insect pest becomes so problematic a treatment is necessary, horticultural oil should be among the first things you consider. When used correctly it is environmentally friendly, provides good control, is cost effective, and protects human safety.

For more on horticultural oil see http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/ent/notes/Other/not45.html.

Industry News

Beginning Nov. 1, the N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services will no longer mail paper copies of soil reports. The results of soil tests and other agronomic reports are available online. To access a reports, visit www.ncagr.gov/agronomi and click on “Find your Report” in the column on the left side.

New editions are available of two classic reference books for plant professionals. The 6th edition of the Manual of Woody Landscape Plants by Michael Dirr was released in August of 2009 and the 3rd edition of Herbaceous Perennial Plants by Allan Armitage was released in May of 2008. There are still lots of copies of older editions out there, but if you want the most up to date information, make sure you get the latest edition. Both are produced by Stipes Publishing, Chicago, IL.

There is proposed legislation that would change the NC Landscape Contractor License. The Green Industry Council of North Carolina is pushing for the legislation change in order to promote professionalism and head off other more restrictive legislation. The proposed legislation would require continuing education and potentially expands the definition of who must be licensed. Discussions are ongoing about grandfathering, fees, and to whom this license will apply. Again, this is not yet a law, and you can view the proposed legislation at http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/Sessions/2009/Bills/House/PDF/H1408v1.pdf.
Upcoming Events

- **Nov 18. Scouting, Evaluation, and Treatment of Pests in Southeastern NC**: 1:30pm—4:30pm, New Hanover County Arboretum Auditorium. This workshop will teach you how to identify typical pest problems in the landscape and how to treat those problems. Participants will receive tools (hand lens and books) that will help identify pests and will have the chance to practice skills in the field. Three hours of pesticide recertification credit is available in categories L, N, D, and X. Registration costs $30 and space is limited. For more information and to register, visit [http://newhanover.ces.ncsu.edu/index.php?page=events&event_id=16159](http://newhanover.ces.ncsu.edu/index.php?page=events&event_id=16159).

- **Dec 2. Soils and Fertility Workshop**: 2pm—4pm, New Hanover County Arboretum Auditorium. Learn about how to manage soils in New Hanover County landscapes, learn how to take and administer soil tests. There is no cost, but registration is required. Call Danyce at (910) 798-7662 to register.

- **Dec 3. Landscape Pesticide Update**: 1pm—5pm, Pender County Cooperative Extension Center. Turf care update, disease triage and controlling weeds in beds. 3 hours of pesticide recertification credit will be applied for in Ornamental and Turf. There is no cost, but registration is required. Call (910) 259-1235 for more information or to register.

- **Dec 10. Pruning for Professionals**: 9am—11am, New Hanover County Arboretum Auditorium. We will present techniques, tools, and tips to help you keep plants looking good throughout the year. Weather permitting, there will be outside demonstrations. There is no cost, but registration is required. Call Danyce at (910) 798-7662 to register.

- **Dec 17. Pesticide Safety Workshop**: 2pm—4 pm or 6-8 pm (you may not attend both sessions!), New Hanover County Arboretum Auditorium. This workshop will review how to protect you, your workers, and others when applying pesticides. 2 hours of pesticide recertification credit will be applied for in all categories. There is no cost, but registration is required. Call Danyce at (910) 798-7662 to register.