

Yellow Leaves & Some Other Plant Changes Are Normal in the Fall



Photo from PortsmouthNH.com, Scott McGredy, photographer. As we enter fall, we will see plant changes not only in our evergreen and deciduous trees and shrubs, but also in our lawns.

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As the season changes, plants change as well. This is true this fall in both evergreen and deciduous trees and shrubs as well as in our lawngrasses. The cooler night temperatures and the shorter day length of fall result in changes in the physiology of many of our landscape plants and lawngrasses.

It's common for azaleas to lose a few leaves now. These are the older leaves on the stem near the center of the plant. They turn reddish or yellow and drop from the plant. This is normal from now until spring. However, if the younger leaves, those nearest the tip of the shoot, turn yellow or brown there is cause for concern. Poor drainage, lack of water or alkaline soils may cause this condition.

Yellow leaves may appear on camellias, gardenias, cherry laurel, and oleanders. Again, as with azaleas, these are the older leaves on the stem near the center of the plant. It's normal for these leaves to drop from the plants now until spring. However, do not confuse scale damage on camellias for normal aging of leaves. Scale insects feed on the undersides of camellia leaves, noted there as white or brown specks, causing the upper surfaces of the leaves to be splotched with yellow.

Many of the leaves on sycamore trees have changed from green to brown already. Although this phenomenon occurs every year, it's not caused by a change in day length or temperature. This is not a true seasonal change. It's the result of insects, lacebugs, feeding on the leaves. By the time the damage is visible, there is little that can be done to correct the problem. However, the problem will take care of itself since sycamore trees will soon be dropping their leaves.

Although Florida is not known for exciting fall color, there are enough temperate region plants to provide some fall color, especially in north Florida. Many of the pigments that contribute to the bright colors of autumn are present in leaves from the time they emerge in the spring. During spring and summer the green pigment (chlorophyll) dominates the other pigments and is the major visible color for healthy plants. During fall, the production of new chlorophyll slows until it is finally depleted while other pigments become more evident. The orange, red, and yellow colored leaves are the expressions of the carotenoid pigments. The red and purple

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anthocyanin pigments are responsible for the red and purple color of dogwoods, crape myrtles, and Bradford pears.

Lawngrasses also experience some seasonal changes. The growth rate of lawngrasses slows in the fall. Although this slow-down in growth means less mowing is required, it also means that lawns will not be as attractive as they were during spring and summer. Because of this reduced growth rate, grasses cannot produce enough new leaves to replace the leaves that are dying naturally or being damaged by foot traffic. The end result is a dull, yellow-green lawn.

Numerous reddish purple blades throughout the lawn may be visible now as well. Cooler temperatures, injury to the leaf blades from foot traffic, mowing equipment, vehicles, etc, can cause this. It also could be caused by lack of potassium but is more likely the result of cooler temperatures, especially if it did not show up until fall.

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