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Autumn is for Planting (And it Ain't Far Away!)

By Larry Lael

There's a certain chill in the morning air, the goldfinches will soon be fading to a beautiful chestnut brown, and the incontinent starlings will be massing to do one final whitewash of your windows before departing for warmer climes. These are all important omens that the fall planting season is fast approaching. But the absolute proof of it is that I am still far behind on many of the projects I intended to get done before the autumn rains begin.

Fall is the best time to plant new shade trees, shrubs and that windbreak or privacy screen you've wanted all summer. New fall plantings will not have to face hot weather (and the need for much supplemental watering) for almost seven months. Don't worry about winter cold harming fall plantings. Roots are well insulated in the ground and a three inch layer of mulch can provide added winter protection.

Another good reason to select and plant new trees and shrubs in the fall is that you can observe first hand their fall color. Many plants that have great fall color in crispy New England do not color up well in the soggy Northwest. But there are many trees and shrubs that have outstanding and reliable fall color here. It's helpful to see plants in autumn to see which colors you personally like. Some are subtle and some are bright. Because fall color is influenced by many factors including plant variety, dryness, drainage and weather conditions, you may want to make several trips to your favorite nurseries to see lots of fall color before you make your choices.

As a confirmed tree-hugging plant geek, I am always looking for unusual plants to add to the old standbys. Here are some less-common fall color plants I highly recommend for Northwest gardens:

- **Beauty Berry** "Profusion" (*Callicarpa bodinieri*) has tiny lavender flowers in summer that turn to bright, shiny lavender berries that remain after the leaves drop. The green leaves turn yellow-orange in fall making a sharp contrast with the lavender berries.
- **Fothergilla** "Mount Airy" is a 5-6 foot shrub with fragrant white bottle-brush flowers in spring and green leaves that turn bright red, orange and yellow in fall.
- **Franklinia** (*Franklinia alata*) is a ten to 15 foot multi-stemmed shrub or small tree with shiny large teardrop leaves that turn bright red over burgundy at the same time as it produces white single camellia-like flowers in fall.
- **Ginkgo** "Autumn Gold" is a slow growing, open-branched tree with green leaves shaped like a duck's foot. They turn (you guessed it) bright gold in autumn.
- **Oak leaf hydrangeas** (*Hydrangea quercifolia*) are slow-growing shrubs that have panicles of white flowers in summer and scarlet to burgundy fall color.

- **Smoke bush** “Grace” (*Cotinus obovatus hybrid*) is a 6-10 foot shrub or small tree that has smoky purplish-orange over green summer foliage and bright scarlet fall color. The green leafed American smoke tree (*Cotinus obovatus*) also has outstanding red fall color.
- **Red Maples** (*Acer rubrum*) are large green shade trees that develop bright fall colors in the Northwest. “October Glory” is orange red, “Red Sunset” is scarlet, and “Burgundy Belle” is red over burgundy.
- **Sourwood** (*Oxydendrum arboreum*) is a 15-20 foot slow growing tree with excellent red fall color at the same time as it produces hanging clusters of small bell-shaped white flowers.
- **Stewartia** (*Stewartia monadelphica*, *S. pseudocamellia*, *S. rostrata*.) have very bright, glowing red and orange fall color. The 20 to 30 foot trees have white summer flowers like single camellias and older trees have flaky bark making interesting patterns on their trunks.
- **Witch Hazel** (*Hamamelis intermedia*) is a large shrub or small tree with fringe shaped flowers that hang from the bare zig-zag branches in winter. “Diane” has dark red flowers, “Jelena” has copper orange flowers and “Arnold Promise” has bright yellow flowers. All have bright orangy-red fall color with some overlay of burgundy and maroon.

Also recommended are lots of old standbys such as burning bushes and sweet gums, but they are too numerous to list here. Larger nurseries are usually stocked with a good selection of trees and shrubs well into autumn, but shop early for the best selection. Nurseries will often allow you to purchase plants and leave them in their care until you’re ready to plant. So start early to plan for fall planting and if your timing is right you can have your plants in the ground before the weather is foggy and soggy and the ground is muddy and cruddy!