

Blazing trees

This has been a good gardening season for many of us. The icing on the cake this year has been our long Indian Summer—the sunny days and cold nights are developing some vivid fall colors.

If you love fall color, consider it when selecting the trees in your landscape.

Let's start with some of the best. Maples are famous across New England for their fall color, but most maples struggle in North Dakota due to our alkaline soils and high winds.

Freeman maple, a hybrid of red and silver maple, is very adaptable. 'Autumn Blaze' is extremely popular for its radiant red fall color, although it can suffer some dieback in harsh Dakota winters. 'Sienna Glen' from Minnesota is hardier and more tolerant of wind. The fall color of its foliage is a mosaic of burgundy, red, and orange.

If your soil is not alkaline, take advantage of hardy red maples such as 'October Glory', 'Red

Sunset', 'Northfire', and 'Northwood'. Their brilliant red fall color (shown above) looks particularly striking against a background of evergreens.

Among smaller trees, amur maple, serviceberry and pagoda dogwood have attractive fall color.

If you enjoy golden fall colors, you may like to add a birch to your yard. Look for a variety that tolerates heat and borers, such as 'Prairie Dream' or 'Whitespire', and give it an eastern or northern location to keep it out of the hot afternoon sun.

For something different, try a ginkgo—this prehistoric tree has a unique fan-shaped leaf shape and will drop its leaves all at once (this makes it easier to rake). 'Autumn Gold' is hardy to zone 4 and has gorgeous gold color.

The golden leaves of honey locust are small and easy to rake, too. The hardiest variety is 'Northern Acclaim', developed by NDSU.

Hybrid elms are making a strong comeback now as we look for alternatives to ash trees. Kentucky coffeetree and Mongolian linden have a rich gold color and look promising for us in the Dakotas.


Poplars and cottonwoods have nice gold color in fall, but

keep in mind these are short-lived, weak-wooded trees.

Some trees look ugly in the fall. These include silver maple, hackberry, bur oak, willows, hawthorns, and alders.

Besides colorful leaves, we can also consider the colorful fruit of fall. Mountain ash is famous for its orange fruits in fall. Mountain ash is not a true ash (it is actually a member of the rose family) and is not susceptible to emerald ash borer. They are a good choice whenever you can keep the soil beneath them shaded and cool (mulching helps with this).

Another tree with special fruit in autumn is the 'Prairie Radiance' euonymus. Its pink fruit capsules explode in fall, revealing bright red seeds inside. Its fall foliage is a lovely pink.

Keep in mind that landscape plants with red fall color contrast well with white- or light-colored buildings. Plants with golden foliage contrast well when planted near a darker building, perhaps one made of red brick. 



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