Experts: Nature's leaf show in SC, NC great this year

By Susanne M. Schafer
Associated Press



Changing leaves provide a frame for Cliffside Overlook on Grandfather Mountain in Linville, N.C. Trees are exploding with color at the upper elevations in western North Carolina. SKIP SICKLER/AP

COLUMBIA, S.C. — Fall foliage experts in North and South Carolina say the weather during the past several months has paved the way for great leaf viewing in the coming days.

While colors in the northern, higher elevations of South Carolina are still emerging, trees are exploding with color at the upper elevations in western North Carolina.

And if the winds stay calm and temperatures cool in the two states, leaf watchers may be able to enjoy Mother Nature's fall show for several weeks if they are able to follow the colors south.

"This weekend is the peak for the Blue Ridge Parkway, probably above 3,000 feet," predicted Howie Neufeld, a professor of plant physiology at North Carolina's Appalachian State University in Boone.

Neufeld, who uses the handle "Fall Color Guy" on his Twitter and Facebook pages, offers daily updates on the latest spots to view the region's wide ranges of fall color.

The professor, who has taught at the southern Appalachian school for 26 years, has made the study of fall color a big part of his research. He said the region's diversity of trees and its variants of low-high elevation ranges make for optimum leaf peeping.

The weather patterns in August and September were key to a great show this fall, he said in a telephone interview.

"This year, we haven't had the drought. While it rained earlier in the summer, in August it dried up. With it being cool and sunny in September, that has provided the two conditions for good color formation," Neufeld said.

There was a recent spell of temperatures [illegible] reaching the 80s that slowed the color development somewhat, but the coming weeks should make for prime viewing — if the winds remain calm and rainstorms don't blow the leaves off the trees, he added.

"Dedicated leaf lookers should be happy," Neufeld said.

Peak colors have been reached in the Boone, Blowing Rock and Grandfather Mountain areas in the western portion of North Carolina, he said.

Donald Hagan, a forest ecologist and lecturer at Clemson University in northwestern South Carolina, said in a separate interview that he thinks the heavy rains the Southeast experienced during the summer provided a moist soil for the region that may help the trees in the state retain their leaves for a longer period.

During a recent trip to Table Rock State Park near Pickens in northern South Carolina, the colors had barely begun to switch, he said.

"It will be a few more weeks before the trees really begin to peak in South Carolina," Hagan said. "But in areas to the north, around the Blue Ridge Parkway, the colors are really popping right now."

Hagan said only the dogwoods, black gums and sourwoods are beginning to turn at higher elevations in South Carolina.

And while a wet soil might mean the trees will hold onto their leaves longer this year, that doesn't necessarily translate into vibrant colors with variations of yellows, oranges and reds, he added.

It is the combination of cool night temperatures followed by mild, sunny days that force the bright yellows and reds to be seen, he said. The green chlorophyll in leaves decreases as days become shorter and nights cooler, allowing the yellow or red pigments to emerge, he said.

Drought in past years has caused leaves to fall before their colors could change, he said.



Holly Raymond of the Tampa Bay, Fla., area flies through the colorful misty trees at Navitat Canopy Adventures in Barnardsville, N.C. While leaf color is exploding in western North Carolina, in the higher elevations in South Carolina, the dogwoods, black gums and sourwoods are just beginning to turn. Experts say leaf watchers may be able to enjoy Mother Nature's fall show for several more weeks. JOHN D. SIMMONS/AP