Fall leaves expected to change color earlier this year

Upstate leaves should peak in mid-October

BY MIKAYLA KREUZBERGER
THE JOURNAL

CLEMSON — The leaves are changing colors with the cooler weather, and one Clemson University professor thinks they are changing much faster than expected this time of the year.

Victor Shelburne, professor emeritus at Clemson's School of Agricultural, Forest and Environmental Sciences, said the leaf-bearing trees in the Upstate are about 10 days ahead of their typical foliage peak season.

He expects the Upstate to hit peak season around late October, and early November for the Piedmont area.

According to a press release from Clemson University, Shelburne said that color change is based on environmental factors, such as rainfall, temperature and duration of daylight.

"As days become shorter and nights cooler, the green chlorophyll in leaves begins to be replaced by naturally occurring pigments. Different pigments create different colors," the report cited.

Shelburne said his students and he traveled from Clemson to the Blue Ridge Parkway to introduce them to the colorful mountain trees.

"The change in elevation is between 700 feet above sea level to just over 6,000 feet, so the students see the difference in species associated with elevation (and climate)," Shelburne said. "And, in the case of leaf color, (students saw) earlier leaf color in the higher elevations because of the cooler weather associated with higher elevations."

SEE LEAVES, PAGE A5

LEAVES: 'The East has the most leaf color variation'

Shelburne said leaves are more vibrant "when a dryer summer is followed by crisp autumn nights.

"The limited summer rains came just in time," Shelburne said in the press release. "While we're still in a drought, we received enough rain to keep most of the leaves on the trees."

He said serious drought can cause leaves to fall before they change color, and too much cold weather too early can shorten the season.

Shelburne told The Journal the best places to see vibrant colors in this area are in the mountains of Georgia, South Carolina and North Carolina, rather than in the Piedmont.

If you're looking to travel to find the best colors, he said New England and the Appalachian mountains into Maine have the most reliable fall colors.

"The East has the most leaf color variation due to the large number of species," he said.

Leaf-bearing trees in the Northeast are currently in their peak season, whereas Southern hardwoods are just now beginning to change because of the warmer weather, he said.

According to the press release, Shelburne said the best time to view colors is right after a cold front moves through. The front pushes away the haze and creates a clear, sunny day.

mikayla@dailyjm.com | (864) 975-6681



JESSICA NELMS | THE JOURNAL

Leaves are changing colors earlier this year, according to Clemson University professor emeritus Victor Shelburne.

AREA TREES AND THEIR FALL COLORS

Dogwood, scarlet
Sourwood, brilliant scarlet
Red maple, pink to bright red
Blackgum, brilliant orange
Smooth and winged sumac, bright red
White oak, red to purple
Scarlet oak, brilliant scarlet
Northern red oak (mountains), red
Yellow poplar, yellow
Sassafras, orange to scarlet
Sweetgum (Piedmont, low mountains), yellow to scarlet/maroon

The Upstate has more than 100 different species of trees and shrubs.