Potential for great fall foliage in Carolinas

BY SUSANNE M. SCHAFER
ASSOCIATED PRESS

COLUMBIA — Fall foliage experts in the Carolinas are predicting the coming season may well be a great one.

They credit the region's mild drought over the spring and summer, as well as the outlook for fall rainfall, storms and frost.

Some rain is needed to keep trees healthy, but not so much stormy weather that leaves are blown from the trees too early. Also crucial is the timing of the first frost at certain elevations in the Appalachians, the experts said.

"A little bit of drought, a little bit of stress is good for fall color. It also condenses the season, so we get more colors to come out at once," Clemson University forest ecologist Donald Hagan said.

However, it's a little too early to predict exactly when the height of the season will come, Hagan said in a telephone interview.

The next few weeks in September, leading into the expected high season in October, are key, said the professor in northern South Carolina.

"If we get some early fall cold fronts, followed by some bright, sunny days, that would really bring out the color in the coming weeks," Hagan said.

Western Carolina University biology professor Kathy Mathews said she believes this fall could be one of the best leaf color seasons in the past 10 years she has been keeping tabs on the foliage.

"I think it's going to be an exceptionally good year," she said in a telephone interview. "Three words explain it: unusually dry weather."

Lack of water causes sugar concentrations in the leaves to increase because trees aren't getting as much water in the roots, Mathews said. That leads to an increase in the red pigments that appear when green chlorophyll begins to recede.

"That's what causes the leaf colors to really pop," she said, even as oranges and yellow pigments begin to appear at the same time in differing tree types.

Mathews, who makes an annual fall color forecast for the school located about 50 miles southwest of Asheville, said the "wild card" in the predictions is the temperature, which can affect the outcome for peak viewing dates.

"A late frost can delay or prevent and actual peak at certain elevations," the biology professor said.

"Our frost has been more and more unpredictable of late," she said. "It allows for a big window" when viewing might be best.

Biology professor Howard Neufeld, who writes a weekly fall color update for Appalachian State University in Boone, N.C., points out that dogwoods have already started turning their deep red near his home in the mountains of western North Carolina.

Some red and sugar maples have begun to turn orange-red and yellow, he said, but he described it as "quite sporadic."

"But right now, all looks good for a great fall leave color season," said Neufeld.