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Leaf color has begun changing in the southern Appalachians.

Fall color season off to an early start in the southern Appalachians

THE JOURNAL STAFF

CLEMSON — Dry conditions in 2016, coupled with a late-summer cold front brought on by the remnants of Hurricane Irma, have jumpstarted fall color in the southern Appalachians.

In his annual fall foliage assessment, Clemson University forest ecologist Don Hagan said the bounty of fall colors enjoyed by so many leaf lookers and businesses is seven to 10 days ahead of schedule in some areas. He took a scouting trip from Clemson up the Blue Ridge escarpment to an elevation of 5,600 feet on Sept. 18 and found colors to be surprisingly far along.

“Looking ahead in the next weeks, if we see a typical late-summer seasonal transition with cold fronts and bright blue skies, color development will really begin to accelerate,” Hagan said.

In addition to keeping an eye on the weather for cold fronts and bluebird skies, flatlanders and people in the Piedmont should pay

close attention to certain nearby harbinger tree species for a good indication of when it’s best to head to the high country.

“When you start to see color in species such as sourwood, black gum and flowering dogwood, you know that the fall color season has started and there will be more and more color in the weeks to come,” Hagan said.

The good news for tourists and businesses is that just because the leaves are changing sooner doesn’t necessarily mean the show will be shorter. The fall color season in the southern Appalachians generally starts in late September and winds down in early November. Since tree stress and cooler temperatures are key factors in color development, changes begin in the upper elevations and move downward at a rate of about 1,000 feet per week.

Peak color in Upstate South Carolina should arrive in early November, and then the leaves will start filling gutters and blanketing lawns.