

Texas Has Fall Color Too

New England is not the only place to see spectacular fall color. This time of year, Old Man Winter blows delightfully cool fronts down into Texas, and our native maples begin to brighten woodlands and forested landscapes with brilliant arrays of yellow, orange and red. There's no more pleasant way to enjoy an autumn afternoon than to walk among these flaming trees, to feel the crisp air against your cheeks and to watch the slow-motion dance of a maple leaf's tumble to the forest floor.

Texas is blessed with a diversity of maple species. Some are well-known and are easy to observe by the road; others grow far off the beaten path, but are worthy of a day's hike to discover.

The three most noticeable maples are red maple (*Acer rubrum*) and two types of sugar maple (*Acer barbatum* and *A. saccharum*), found in slope forests and bottomlands of eastern Texas. Sugar maples can be seen at Caddo Lake, Atlanta State Recreation Area and Sabine National Forest.

White-tailed deer eat young red maple and sugar maple leaves. Squirrels and birds enjoy the fruits, and bees and butterflies visit the flowers. Sugar maples have many human uses: sugar and syrup, hardwood lumber, flooring, furniture, boxes and crates, even bowling pins.

Lost Maples State Natural Area takes its name from an isolated population of bigtooth maples (*Acer grandidentatum*) that grow in shaded canyons of the Edwards Plateau. It is a beautiful drive down 16 to this gem of the Texas Park System. Be sure to stop in Medina on your way out and get some of those wonderful Texas apples or a 5 pound apple pie.

Other isolated but easily accessible populations of bigtooth maple can be found in the Chisos Mountains of Big Bend National Park and in Guadalupe Mountains National Park.

How do maple leaves change their color? Maple leaves obtain their green color from chlorophyll, a pigment found in the leaves that allows them to process sunlight. Autumn's cooler temperatures and shorter days trigger the chlorophyll to move from the leaves to the branches, trunk and roots, so the orange and yellow pigments that are always present become more noticeable. On warmer fall days, sugar moves in the leaves of some trees and is trapped by the cooling of night. As sugar accumulates, the leaves turn brighter red.

Take time this fall to enjoy a walk among these majestic maples that provide not only a lovely escape from our busy lives but also a bounty of resources for wildlife and raw materials for humans.

If you can't get away there are some pretty spectacular autumn displays right here in San Saba County. The leaves of cedar elm, Virginia creeper, red oak, wild plum and flameleaf sumac create a wonderful blending of yellow, apricot and red. Bradford pear is not a native American tree, it was first brought to America from China in 1908, but in the fall it can have many splendid colors from red to orange and dark maroon. One can even appreciate the beauty of poison ivy this time of year although I prefer to keep my a distance.

Go outside & play. Enjoy a brisk walk and see how many other sources of fall color you can find.