

How Do you Define Fall or Autumn?

How do you define “fall” or “Autumn”? Cooler temperatures? Leaves developing a new color scheme? Or, is your thought ‘oh drat, here come the allergies?’ Regional Extension Agent Sallie Lee has done some research related to allergies, in particular those associated with plants, although though allergies can also be caused by many other things.

Some experts agree that allergies are the most common illness in the U.S., causing some degree of misery to approximately 40% of our population. Allergies are categorized as ‘seasonal’ or ‘perennial’; a seasonal allergy is usually a reaction to a trigger typically present for only part of a year. Seasonal allergies are usually associated with pollen from spring or fall blooming trees, grasses, and uncultivated plants, while perennial allergies are present year round, such as pet dander and dust mites.

Pollens are tiny powdery grains released from flowering plants, then carried by wind or insects that cross-pollinate other plants for reproductive purposes. When pollen is spread by the wind, it can land in our eyes, nose, lungs, or even on our skin to initiate an allergic reaction. These reactions include hay fever, conjunctivitis (eye allergies), and allergic asthma.

Starting as early as late winter, plant initiated allergies cause us misery, with peak season coming in early to mid spring. Oak, elm, birch, ash, hickory, poplar, sycamore, maple, cypress and walnut are among offenders that create problems for a range of sufferers. Peach, pear and apple are examples of insect pollinated trees, and those bees whose fuzzy bodies carry the orange ‘pollinator’ flag are a welcome sight to beekeepers and fruit growers alike.

Tips for reducing exposure to allergies in our landscapes include checking labels of plants prior to purchasing and installing. Often trees and shrubs are labeled “seedless” or “fruitless” (translates to ‘less mess to rake up’), but these are males and can produce large quantities of pollen. Plants that are susceptible to disease can also contribute to the problem, since rust, black spot, mildew and other plant diseases reproduce by spores. However, disease-resistant plants in their proper environment shouldn’t be as prone to infection; consequently the environment around them will be healthier.

If you must have high-allergy plants in your yard because they are favorites, locate them away from windows, patios, frequently used walkways, or front/back doors. Conversely, use pollen-free selections whenever possible, such as tuberous begonias or double chrysanthemums. And if you have a tree or hedge that has a high allergy potential but can’t bear or afford to remove it, consider keeping it sheared so it will flower less. Boxwood has allergenic flowers but if pruned hard, it rarely blooms.

In addition to online sites offering information regarding “allergy” plants, another source of helpful information is a book titled “Allergy-Free Gardening” by Thomas Leo Ogren. In his book, Mr. Ogren establishes O.P.A.L.S, or Ogren Plant Allergy Scale, which covers 5,000 commonly encountered plants (trees, shrubs, grasses, etc.) and ranks them according to their impact on the general population of allergy sufferers. The scale ranks plants between 1 and 10, with “1” being the safest, least allergenic (i.e., Red Maple ‘Autumn Glory’), and “10” the most allergenic (Bottlebrush is a ‘9’), according to Mr. Ogren.

Check out “Allergy-Free Gardening” at www.allergyfree-gardening.com or contact the Bibb County Extension office at 205-926-3117 for additional information.