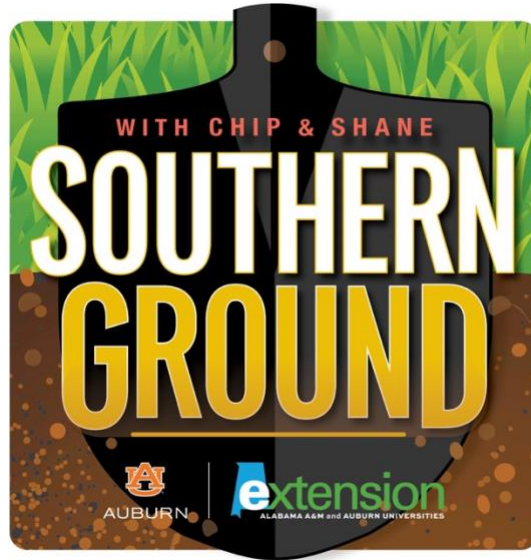




Season 1 Episode 22—Best Trees for Fall Color

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Announcer

Welcome to the *Southern Ground* podcast provided by Alabama Extension through Auburn University. Extension educators Shane Harris and Dr. Chip East discuss seasonal lawn and garden topics, address common questions, and provide the practical solutions you want to know. Let's dig in to our southern ground.

Shane Harris

Hello everyone, and welcome to another episode of *Southern Ground*. I'm Shane Harris and joining me is Dr. Chip East.

Chip East

Hey, Shane, how are you doing today?

Shane Harris

I'm doing well. Happy to see you today, Chip. Chip's actually celebrating a birthday today.

Chip East

Glad to be here for another episode of *Southern Ground* on my birthday, that's right.

Shane Harris

We'll have the party at some point, I'm sure, later on the birthday cake and all that. But, as horticulturist for Alabama Cooperative Extension System, the topic we're going to cover today is going to definitely be a true, true favorite as we enter into the autumn season here in the state of Alabama. Fall colors is definitely a highlight for us as outdoor enthusiasts. As horticulturist, I just love this time of year, especially to go to the mountains and enjoy the fall color and the cooler weather and then just enjoy nature itself.

Chip East

Trees are my friend and so learning the names of the different trees and all, you got all kind of friends in the woods. And they are pretty. To me, there's something beautiful about them, even when they're dormant. Deciduous trees that do not have a leaf on them in the wintertime, there's something pretty about that too. But this fall color Shane, is when they're really... If I said this tree is showing off now that that is my favorite. You're right, that is beautiful colors and spectacular time of year to be looking at them as we're upon the season of that beautiful color.

Shane Harris

Here in Alabama, as we transition to September and October.... Typically for the state of Alabama, we don't have the spectacular fall color like you have, say in the Tennessee and the North Carolina mountains. And the Smoky Mountains is definitely my favorite, the Blue Ridge Parkway, North Georgia, favorite areas to see. Amazing fall color even going into the northeast, New England states. The fall color is dramatic. But as we begin to transition from late summer to fall, just driving around the countryside, you begin to see the trees begin to change and transition from that dull green to some yellows to some reds, hopefully not too too many browns, but we do have brown as one of our distinctive color for some species of trees, but you just begin to see that transition. The cooler weather starts to set in. Football season, Chip. Hunting season approaching not long after that. It's just a fantastic time to be outside and enjoy those fall colors.

Chip East

It is, Shane. And we need to think about what causes the color change and why one tree may have a yellow fall color, another may be red or whatever. Well, the green, Shane, that we see most of the time in our plants is when the tree makes food. Chlorophyll is produced, and chlorophyll gives the tree, the leaf, its green color. And we see that spring through late summer. Chlorophyll the green pigment. It's green. It makes the plant, the leaf green. All right. There's other pigments. And, carotenoids is one of them that's there all the time. We just don't see it because the chlorophyll is so dominant. And you take a plant, most any plant, Shane, house plant in your house, go put it in a closet for a week, and pull it out of that dark closet. What color are the leaves? Yellow. Well, and we think this plant's sick, it's yellow. Well, what's happening is we're not producing the chlorophyll. We need the sunlight, the photosynthesis to produce the chlorophyll.

So when that process stops, that carotenoids... It's always, it's there. It's just the pigment, the green is more dominant, the chlorophyll. So when the days get shorter and we don't have as much light, there's several things it causes. But the day length is a big part of it. We don't have as much chlorophyll. So this yellow pigment comes out. And then there's one other pigment that is not produced all the time, but anthocyanin is another. That's what causes the red color. In the fall, well all year, the plant's producing sugars. That chlorophyll, all that's going on. Well, when the days.... I say as the nights get longer or the days get shorter, ever how you look at it. When

that happens and we're not producing the chlorophyll, the sugars made in that leaf doesn't go to the roots or it doesn't feed the tree. They get trapped in that leaf because we have warm days and cool nights. During that cool night, it's not translocating those sugars down to the roots. When those sugars are up in that leaf, and we have a cool night, that's what produces the anthocyanin, which gives it this red color.

Shane Harris

And what you're describing is what people trying to forecast for fall colors. If you're making a trip to the mountains, or you want to know when the fall colors are going to be good, how are they going to be good this year or not? It's a natural recipe of a combination of, like you said, day length, moisture, temperature. We see drought, we see hot weather actually become a negative effect on fall color. So experts are hard...it's hard to predict when the fall color is going to be, how good it's going to be. We know some years is better than others, but what Chip is describing is just a recipe, a natural recipe that must occur for the fall colors to be brilliant.

Chip East

The perfect recipe might be warm days, cool nights. We don't want a lot of rain, but we want there to be moisture in the ground. If you're in a drought in the fall, and we have hot days, hot nights, and then eventually we just have a frost that comes in, then that's a terrible fall color year. But if we have moisture in the ground, and we have warm days and cool nights, you know, no early frost coming in, that would be a good recipe. And I can't predict it for months ahead. Now, I will say, while it's happening, like this year, for instance, we've had the rains, so we're not in a drought, so that part would be good. Now we just need warm days and cool nights.

Shane Harris

While we're recording this in the month of August it's hot. It's hot. It's been extremely hot. A lot of moisture throughout the southeast. So right now we have no idea. You know, typically here for the state of Alabama, it's late October into early November. Other parts of the southeast, it may be late September to early October. Just in Alabama, we just don't have the weather conditions typically as good. And as we get into tree species, some of the tree species that have brilliant fall color tend to like the mountains and further north of the state of Alabama anyway.

Chip East

We'll hold off on tree species till later, but I will mention one right now. Shane, I have a black gum in my yard. That black gum is...their leaves are turning red and they're falling off now. And like you say, it's still hot. But that just happens to be one that kind of, to me, is an exception to the rule. But yeah, it's turning red and falling off now.

Shane Harris

And that's likely another podcast. That's probably stress, something else going on. I've experienced the exact same thing at another property of the exact same species. So Chip talked about green being the dominant color. If that chlorophyll is present, you're still going to have the natural green in the fall color kaleidoscope, pattern, patchwork of colors that we enjoy in the fall. And if you are riding along in the fall color and see the transition of the deciduous trees, that green that we still see is the pines. Those are your cedars. Those are a bit further

north. Those are going to be the going to be the hemlocks. And then you also have the hollies, you have the magnolias. All those are your natural evergreen trees that are going to still stay green throughout the year.

Chip East

And gives you something pretty beautiful when you see the other colors mixed in with the green as well. So yeah, I like those as well, just because it doesn't turn a color and the leaf fall off doesn't mean I don't like it. Those are pretty as well.

Shane Harris

That's part of that kaleidoscope of colors. It needs to be in there. One of the earlier trees that we see is yellow poplar beginning to turn yellow. And so you get to see yellow, and Chip mentioned black gums turning red. The most prominent colors are definitely red and yellow. And certain species are known for that. One of the earliest trees to transition is yellow poplar. Here in the south, it doesn't do very well. It is one of the first ones to bud out, but it's also the first ones to begin showing fall color. It just doesn't hold its color as good as it we wished it did in the state of Alabama.

Chip East

Yeah. The hickories is another that's yellow that I like to see too. And I think of that...but they're later than the poplar.

Shane Harris

Yeah. So if you drive around, and that's the fun part. Like, what color is that tree? Especially if you see one species that's just really dominant in that green landscape. It stands out. What is that tree? Well, your reds are typically the red maples. That's by far the most popular reds. But you mentioned the black gums in the natural setting. Sourwoods is a beautiful tree, especially around the mountains and high elevation areas. And then our flowering dogwoods, sweet gums. Later on scarlet oaks. All those are prominent red and fall colors that we have in the southeast.

Chip East

On the red maples, a lot of times...well, we call them red maples because they bloom red in the spring. It's a tiny little bloom. But you'll see, it won't have a leaf on it. But you'll see that red in the early spring of the red maples. So some of the red maples, there's a October glory. There's a red sunset. There's others that do have the red fall color. Some of the red maples will have a yellow fall color. It just depends. One of my favorite trees, and it's not everybody's favorite tree, Shane, but it has, to me, one of the prettiest yellow colors is the gingko. They are beautiful yellow when they come in at that time of year. Now, why somebody might not like it is the fruit on it, and you can get male gingkos, but the fruit on a female one might not smell as pleasing aroma is another flower. But that fruit on it just does not smell good.

Shane Harris

I agree with you. The yellows are my favorite because I'll go with oranges and the yellows. And you mentioned the hickories. My number one tree is definitely sugar maple. When I built my house, that was the first tree that I

went and bought and planted there. And it's in a prominent location by my sidewalk that I get to enjoy it in the fall. And that reminds me of the mountains, you know, those trips to the Appalachian Mountains to enjoy all these fall colors that are a little bit better. But you mentioned gingko. We mentioned the sugar maples. some of the red maples will actually turn yellow. The yellow poplars, sassafras, river birch, willow oaks, American beech. All those are gonna provide that fall color. And here in the state of Alabama, we don't get a lot of yellow. Like, say, those poplars tend to be the most prominent. But when you get one that stands out boy, you want to enjoy it.

Chip East

I'm a tree guy, so, I mean, there's a lot of trees I like, but the Japanese red leaf maple in the summertime, you see that red leaf and it's nice. Well, there are some green Japanese maples, green leaf Japanese maple. Well, a lot of people don't like those as well because it's green in the summer and not crimson or red. Well, to me, in the fall of the year, those green Japanese maples have the prettiest fall color as compared to the red Jap maples. I really like the green fall color, well the fall color on the green one. It'll turn a darker red, but the green ones produce.... They look pretty in the fall. I really like those. So again, there's a lot of trees I like and I like a mixture of them. I don't like to have all of one species out there. I like a....That's what you get when you go to the mountains and you see that variety.

Shane Harris

Yeah. And we're going to talk about some top trees that are favorites that do have a great fall color rule in the podcast. With that, I want to throw another color out, Chip, not as prominent, but when it stands out and it's there, it'll catch your eye. That's purple. Now, we don't think of a lot of purple in fall color. We're going to surprise you with this when I bring this up. But the sweet gum, It is one of those trees that we have in the state of Alabama. It can be a bit of a Burgundy red, but they are sometimes where they can be a just a deep, deep purple. And this. Wow. I mean, that's a sweet gum that's doing that. That's one of those trees that we don't really care for because it tends to be a weed and a nuisance here in the state of Alabama. They're everywhere. But wow. But they can show off in the landscape with a true..... that deep, deep purple.

Chip East

They produce a lot of seeds and they come up wild a lot of places. Sweet gum is actually the second most common tree in the woods in Alabama. Shane, if you are just walking in the woods, you'll run into loblolly pine first. If you close your eyes and walk through the.....depends on what patch of woods you're in, I guess. But, sweet gum is the second most common tree in our woods. And you're right. It's a good one. People don't like the sweet gum ball. It holds, the seeds, and people don't like to step on that bare foot. And I understand that, but the tree itself is a good tree.

Shane Harris

We'll just enjoy it in the landscape, in the woods, not necessarily in our yard, but when you drive by the, countryside and you see one out there in the landscape and you have to sort of do a double take, it's like, what is that purple, or that Burgundy purple, that most likely is a sweet gum.

Chip East

I'll tell you a couple more, Shane, that I like that I'm going to go away from trees for a minute. And because there's a lot of ornamental shrubs, maybe that would look good as well. But, a nandina, has a beautiful color in the wintertime, those leaves will stay. I want to say I don't want to say ever. They don't drop their leaves, but that leaf will turn a reddish color in the winter on the nandina. That's pretty, but one of my favorite plants. ShaneI grew up doing this all through high school, working at a blueberry farm. Blueberries have a beautiful red color in the fall and that's that anthocyanin and you're right, that purple is part of it too. You see that on other things, but that blueberry....to me, it's an ornamental plant that we get fruit from. You can just plant it just for the fruit now. But that is a beautiful ornamental plant in a yard. Make a good hedge if you want that, and you get fruit off of it as well. But that's a nice one.

Shane Harris

The last color is brown. Now brown tends to be a little bit negative because it's sort of dull, is not very popular is not very showy. Brown is typically not a good color because it tends to indicate dead. But on the oaks primarily, those are the last ones to actually transition to their color. Some, from the red oak family may show a little bit of red, but that brown or that chestnut brown. The American beech has a lot of brown color that holds its leaves throughout the winter. But a lot of the white oaks and the red oaks will tend to show a lot of brown in color. And it may not be as showy, but it's still that kaleidoscope of colors, especially when you get a blend of the greens and the reds and yellows and the purples and the oranges and brown is in there. I think of the M and M's Chip, you know, all the different colors and Skittles. You know, they advertise those candies. But it's just when you have all those colors together, they just make a beautiful scene.

Chip East

Absolutely. I'll mention one more. That kind of goes in to the brown and maybe I'll call it a rust color. Might have a little red in it, but a bald cypress. Bald cypress is again, I say this every time we talk about a tree Shane. That is one of my favorite trees. I love a bald cypress and I like them in the summertime too. But the fall of the year, I'll call it a rusty color. Shane, we might could call it brown. That rusty. It is a beautiful fall color on a bald cypress. I love that tree.

Shane Harris

Maybe even call it chestnut color. You know, and that's the beauty of the trees is they have variations. The red maples could be red, yellow, scarlet. The oaks can be brown and red. You see the variation within the species. Even with the landscape plants that we're about to talk about. But nature's definitely amazing, in the fall colors, the autumn season, in the Deep South and other parts of the country. Take the time to enjoy those trees and those beautiful colors, especially if you're curious about what they are. Get the tree id app, get the phone app out there and go see what it is and enjoy it.

Chip East

You'll learn to add them from their color in the fall too once you study them a little bit. You'll drive down the road and say oh that's a hickory.

Shane Harris

And that's what we teach in tree id, you start learning the trees. You can tell by shape and color and form. Even going down that road that's a hickory that's a pecan. That's a white oak, that's a dogwood, that's a ginkgo. From a far distance you can tell exactly what it is. So we will transition now as we end this podcast about favorite trees, we always get calls about I want some fall color, I want to put a tree in my yard. And I want something with that beautiful fall color. What should I get? What would you recommend?

And so, we've got a list.... of sort of a top ten list, and that list can definitely expand and, go back and forth. Chip and I probably would not agree with the top ten. So maybe we don't need to do a top ten, but just throw some favorites out there. Depends on what you like, what color you got and what space you have, where you live. If that tree is going to be prominent and survive. I mentioned earlier, mine is sugar maple because of the of the mountains. That's my number one, number one tree. And I would imagine that ginkgo and the red maples would probably be up in that area for just pure dominant color. Consistent color in the Deep South here in the state of Alabama, red maple, Japanese maple in some people's opinion, definitely top of the list must haves for fall color.

Chip East

Yeah. When people ask, what kind of tree should I plant, again we're horticulture guys. I mean, I love a lot of these, but it's the location. You got to look at your power lines and how close to a house..... I think that would be a good podcast to, of selecting trees. But, I want to look at how much space we got. I don't worry about how fast it grows. I mean we can, but I mean if we manage a tree correctly, we can make it grow faster. I want to plant the tree we want, and it doesn't matter if it takes time for it to grow. It's okay. There's things we can do to help that along. But putting the right tree in the right location is so important. All these to me, there's some beauty at different times of the year.

Shane Harris

It's hard to just pick one. You know, if you got space for one, you have to narrow it down. But, in a home landscape, plant more than one, you know, especially for fall color or for shade or spring flowering. We mentioned the dogwood earlier. You get dogwood, you get the beautiful white flowers in the spring, and then you get that beautiful fall color. And so you're getting, two advantages of there.

Chip East

That's a good one because we can have flowers in the spring and the pretty color.

Shane Harris

And say, for the Japanese maple, as you mentioned, because so many different cultivars may start off green, may start off red, may start off orange, and then transition in the summer and transition again in the fall. That's definitely, top of list of a must have.

Chip East

Depending on the site. There's certain trees I would like on a high dry site as compared to a low moist site. So maybe a dogwood wouldn't be my favorite for a high dry site. Might could grow it there, but bald cypress might be higher on my list. Or you don't see these much in the trade, but Post oak is on a high dry site, because it can tolerate that.

Shane Harris

A hickory, you see the hickories in the mountains and stuff, you know this on a high dry site. That beautiful yellow, orangy, buttery orange color begins to transition into the late fall.

Sugar maple. The sourwood, is going to be your mountain trees. We teach the kids in tree id that, you see where it is. And you learn the tree that this is a mountain tree or this a bottomland type tree. And there's also these trees. If you're in an urban environment, some of these are not going to work. And so I think that's why we do see a lot of red maple in the urban environment. It can tolerate that. And there's been a lot of work on cultivars out there. What this species does well here and does better in other places.

Chip East

Shane A lot of maples are real poplar. We both like the color on the maple, but that's one tree will tolerate the high dry side or low site. And you'll see those maple trees very, very common at nurseries. There's so many different cultivars of them. They're very popular. And there are nurseries that, that's all there grow is maple trees. They're easy to transplant.

And that's something that we could talk about. Like one of my favorite trees is a post oak. It's harder to transplant than a maple. I like a pecan. It's harder to transplant than a maple. But there's other trees that are easier to transplant. There's certain trees that are more in the trade. So when you see the tree you want and you got room for it, so study all that, see how when it's young, it'll fit in that spot. But think about as it ages. I don't want to let a tree get mature and then start cutting it down because it's too big for the location. Space those trees out give them the right location. We might could plant a tree 12 months a year, but if we would plant in the dormant season. So the wintertime, that would be the prime time to plant trees. Not the only time, but we wouldn't have to water it as much. It's easier to get it established and grow better than planting it, let's just say in the July or August. I'd rather be doing that in the dormant season, in the wintertime.

Shane Harris

It's also a good time to pick the tree out. You go out there and it's got yellow leaves or orange leaves or red leaves. You sort of, you know what it's going to look like, in your yard later on. The other side of that is to pick out a tree that sort of grows fast. People ask that question. If you go with a hickory or post oak, they're beautiful trees in nature, but they're very slow growing.

Chip East

They are. There's things we can do to make them grow faster, but that's just naturally a slower growing tree.

Shane Harris

The ones that we mentioned, like the maples, do grow a lot faster. So you do get that instant fall color, an instant tree a little bit quicker than some of the native trees.

Chip East

The fastest growing. Again, a lot of our oak trees are slower growing. One of my favorite oak trees is a burr oak. Shane, we planted some acorns of that earlier this year. It is the slowest growing oak tree, but I still plant it.

Okay, sawtooth oak is like the fastest growing oak tree. But the sawtooth... and people planting it because the wildlife love the acorns. It is a very sweet acorn. Wildlife. Love it. But it doesn't have the fall color that some of the other oaks have. As far as the fall color, that might not be the reason I would plant a sawtooth, but I still like a sawtooth, but it is a fast growing oak tree.

Shane Harris

Yeah. So when you think about landscape design and you think about trees, what do you want that tree to do? Do you want the fall color you want of spring flowers and do you want a shade tree? Do you need a fast grower, possibly even to block an area on your property?

You have to give and take a little bit, but fall color is definitely one that's usually high on the list because you can enjoy it in that autumn season. Other trees that we would

recommend. We mentioned black gum and sour wood. Lots of hickories. Sweet gum is definitely on the list, even though it can be a problem in the state of Alabama. Yellow poplar. You mentioned ball cypress. The list goes on and on and on. And there's so many different cultivars and things that you can have out there. Chip, I would also say the availability of some of these trees can also be an issue. For example, it's hard to find a sour wood or a black gum sometimes, even those are beautiful trees. So you definitely have to do your homework to find some of these tree species.

Chip East

You're right, they're not in the trade because they're not as popular as a maple. Maples is like, the most common one. Well, everybody plants them. Any new subdivision goes in, they are planting red maples because they're easy to transplant. And grow relatively fast. Well, that's why they're planted there. But it's a pretty tree as well. But that's why they're there. Some of these others, like I said, I had black gum in my yard. I didn't plant it. It was naturally in the woods when the house was built. It was there and I didn't cut them. I cut some other trees, and it's not my favorite tree compared to some of the others. If I was planting one, I might would plant something else, but it was there and yeah, it has a pretty color in the late, in summer.

Shane Harris

We could go on and on, on fall colors. And I want to be in the woods right now, Chip, or in the mountains, just taking a walk and enjoying it and looking forward to another fall season of these colors standing out, in the nature, in landscape. Lots of options there if you're thinking about, planting some trees, especially for fall color. And this fall will definitely be the time to be shopping and then planting them as Chip described. And that way you get the opportunity to enjoy these trees for years and years down the road.

Chip East

Absolutely. Just take care of them after you plant them. We will probably do a podcast on that one day and you can enjoy it for years to come.

Shane Harris

If you want more information about trees or growing trees, or even the different species and cultivars that are out there for fall color, there's definitely lots of resources. There's always lots of magazine articles and choices, options out there. Talk to a local nursery. There's information out there on our website and other land grant universities associated with the Extension services, our website through the Alabama Cooperative Extension System is aces.edu. And so you can go to there for definitely more information. Chip, fall colors, fall plants, fall trees. Definitely something that we get excited about and looking forward to another season.

Chip East

Absolutely, Shane.

Shane Harris

We would take you off or listen to another episode of *Southern Ground*. We'll continue this podcast for the rest of the fall on other topics. This podcast is for you to tune in. Hopefully you're being entertained, but also being educated about some of those questions that you might have. We're here to answer those questions and to provide you the information that you need to, that you can make informed decisions.

Chip East

If you need any information, just contact your local Extension office in your county or find us online at www.aces.edu, thanks for listening.

Announcer

Southern Ground has been a production of Alabama Extension at Auburn University.