

Love the Leaves

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It's time once again to love the leaves. With the peak leaf viewing season rapidly approaching, now is when all foliage followers should start planning where they want to go for the visual delight that colorful autumn leaves bring.

First, a bit of science about what actually causes leaves to turn their brilliant fall hues of red, gold, orange and deep purple. A leaf is green because of the pigment called chlorophyll. This pigment plays an important role in the process of photosynthesis which provides nourishment to the plant.

As autumn approaches and the days grow shorter, the chlorophyll begins to break down in deciduous plants. When this occurs, other hidden pigments in the leaf gradually assume dominance. Depending on the plant or tree species, these pigments can include the yellow tones of xanthophyll, orange-red carotene, or the purple and red anthocyanins. With the continued breakdown of chlorophyll, the leaf will eventually wither and fall off.

Several factors affect the timing and intensity of fall leaf colors. Two are elevation and moisture. With each 1,000 foot increases in elevation, the ambient temperature drops three degrees. Simply put, this means that the higher terrain of the

mountain regions makes plant chlorophyll break down sooner than warmer lower elevations. The amount of moisture that has been available to the plant during the summer also plays a role in its fall coloration. Dry conditions cause the plant to experience increased stress and drop its leaves before they have a chance to reach peak color.

According to the N.C. Department of Travel and Tourism, leaves are already turning colors in the higher elevations. Scattered frost has been reported in the northern mountains at elevations above 4,500 feet. Officials at the Blue Ridge Parkway report sourwood and dogwood trees are turning early this year. Near Boone and Blowing Rock, reports of red and gold maple leaves are coming in.

The central mountain areas of North Carolina will begin to see major color changes in two to three weeks. A cool snap will have colors around Asheville begin to emerge during this time as well. One species that will be putting on a show soon include mountain ash with its deep red berries contrasting with soft yellow leaves. Grandfather Mountain with its 5,837 foot elevation is currently a mixture of turning leaves and blooming wildflowers.

The foothills and Piedmont region is just starting to see fall colors appear. Predictions are for the peak season to begin in about two to three weeks and run through early November. Look

for poplar, sourwood, dogwood, and sweetgums to show color first.

Places to view the brilliant fall colors can be as near as your own backyard or as far away as the Great Smoky Mountains. Drives in the Blue Ridge and Smokies can include Craggy Gardens on the Blue Ridge Parkway, Highway 215 out of Canton by the French Broad River, Highway 64 West along the National Scenic Waterfall Byway, and Roan Mountain. Closer to home, there are plenty of great places in Cleveland and Gaston counties to see the autumn leaves.

One of the top local spots to take in the beauty of fall is Crowders Mountain State Park. Ranger Kelly Cook predicts that the leaves at Crowders will not reach their peak until the end of October.

"We have a few black gums, sweet gums and sourwoods beginning to turn now," Cook said. "The recent cooler temperatures will speed up the process."

Cook said an excellent way to take in the fall colors at Crowders Mountain is to scale Kings Pinnacle and view the panorama from that height. On a clear day, you can see all the way to Charlotte.

Down I-85 from Crowders Mountain, Kings Mountain National Military Park and Kings Mountain State Park are two more spots to take in the fall leaves. Timing of the leaf colors at these parks will be similar to

Crowders. Be patient, the end of October will be here before you know it.

Located near the Cleveland/Burke county line, South Mountains State Park already has red maple and sweet gums turning color, according to Ranger Walter Gravley.

"We have most of the same tree species that you find along the Blue Ridge Parkway," Gravley said. "Our trees will probably peak around October 20."

Gravley added that depending on the weather, that date could be moved back five or so days. He also said that South Mountains typically peaked a week after trees on the Blue Ridge Parkway.

There are plenty of sources for information on the fall leaf situation. The N.C. Department of Tourism has a "Leaf Peeper" website at www.visitnc.com which gives constant updates on where to go and what the leaves are doing. They also have a toll-free number at 1-800-VISITNC for information. To access the U.S. Forest Service, call 1-828-257-4200. The number at Crowders Mountain State Park is 853-5375. South Mountains State Park can be reached at 1-828-433-4772.

Information about the leaves in the Blue Ridge and Smoky mountains can be found at High Country Host, Boone, at 1-800-438-7500, or Smoky Mountain Host at 1-800-432-4678.

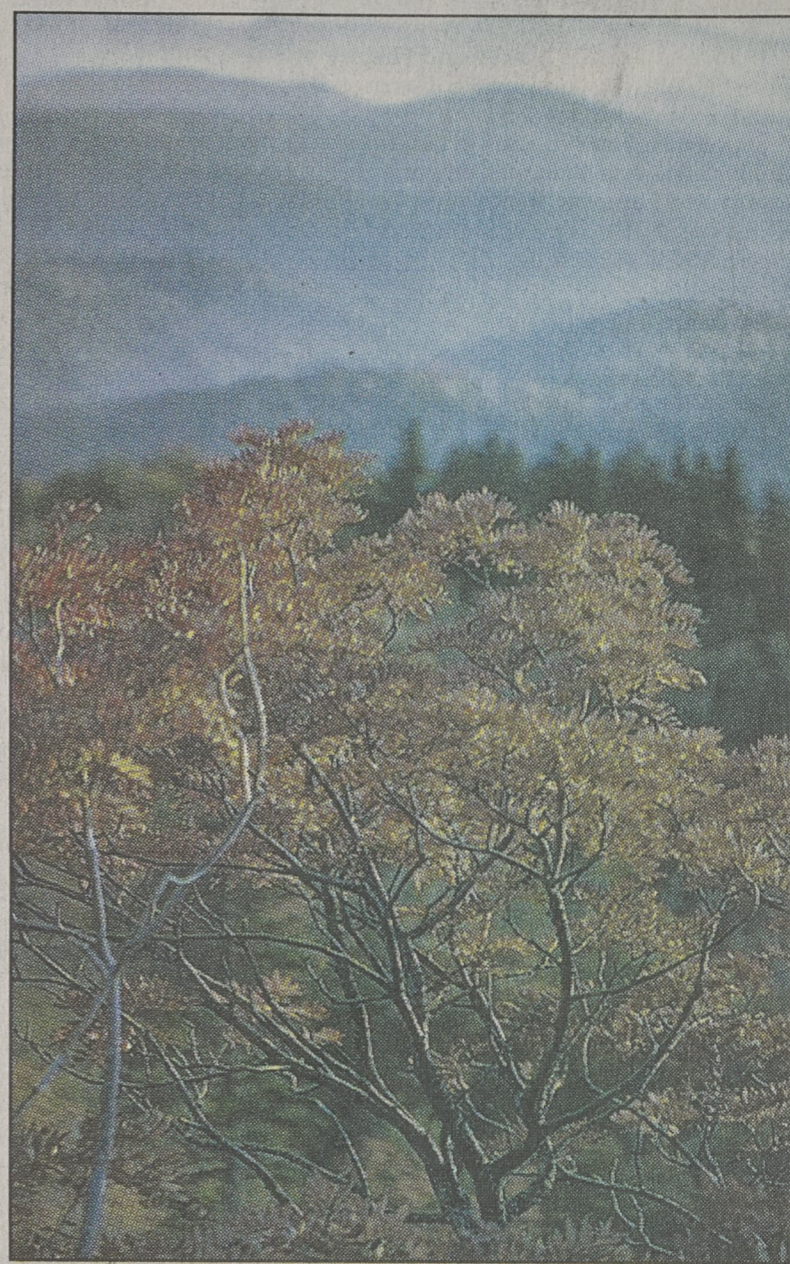


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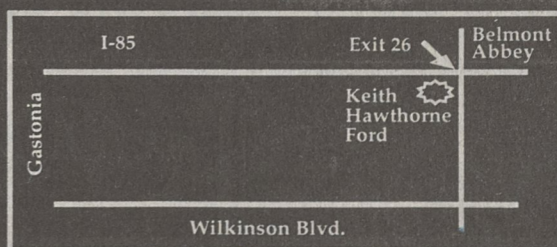
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