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COLUMNS

Campbell Vaughn: Several area trees and bushes can produce vibrant-colored leaves for fall

Campbell Vaughn Columnist

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The summer weather was brutal this year with the heat and rain, then no rain, then 4 inches in two days and then drought back to more rain. The good news is that I think it has finally cooled off for good.

On my annual pilgrimage to Athens for fall meetings, I saw some nice autumn leaf color showing. Some of my favorite natives, like red maples (*Acer rubrum*) scattered randomly in the landscapes and sometimes wild in the woods, are off the charts in showiness due to the mixture of bright oranges and yellows all on the same tree. If you ride down Henry Street in Augusta, the sugar maples are amazing this week.

You might not like them because of the barefoot death balls, but sweetgums that weathered the drought make for some spectacular fall leaf colors. Hickories showing their bright yellow and golden yellow are making their presence known in the fall color world as well. If you get a little deeper into the woods, dogwoods and American beech can be showstoppers, too.

When it gets to the exotic ornamentals that we have grown to cherish in the landscapes and especially for street trees, Chinese pistache (*Pistacia chinensis*) has quickly become a staple for toughness and for their bright red autumn leaves. They are medium sized and have fared very well in our Georgia heat.

Another plant known for its wonderful seasonal color is also one of the most interesting plants in history, literally. *Ginkgo biloba*, or maidenhair tree, is an ancient “living fossil” that is considered one of the oldest plants on earth. The fan-like leaves turn completely yellow and then all drop within a few days of changing, leaving a blanket of yellow at the base of these specimen trees.

Campbell Vaughn: Whether you want moss, or not, here are some tips to help it thrive or die

Don't forget the shrubs, too. There are numerous shrubs that can add to the understory of a yard, a lot like what fall leaves do for a forest. Fothergilla is the sugar maple for fall color leaves on deciduous shrubs. Clethra bursts with yellow when the leaves are getting ready to drop. Virginia sweetspire has a dark red leaf that remain on the stem for a long time once the leaf begins turning. Oakleaf hydrangea also carries a deep red leaf when changing color while the leaves hold on well for the next month or so. Oakleaf hydrangea not only has that fall color leaves, but also has an exfoliating bark to add another unique feature for the bland times the colder weather is about to bring us.

Fall is here and winter is coming. Enjoy the colors while we can because they are going to be few and far between for a while to come.