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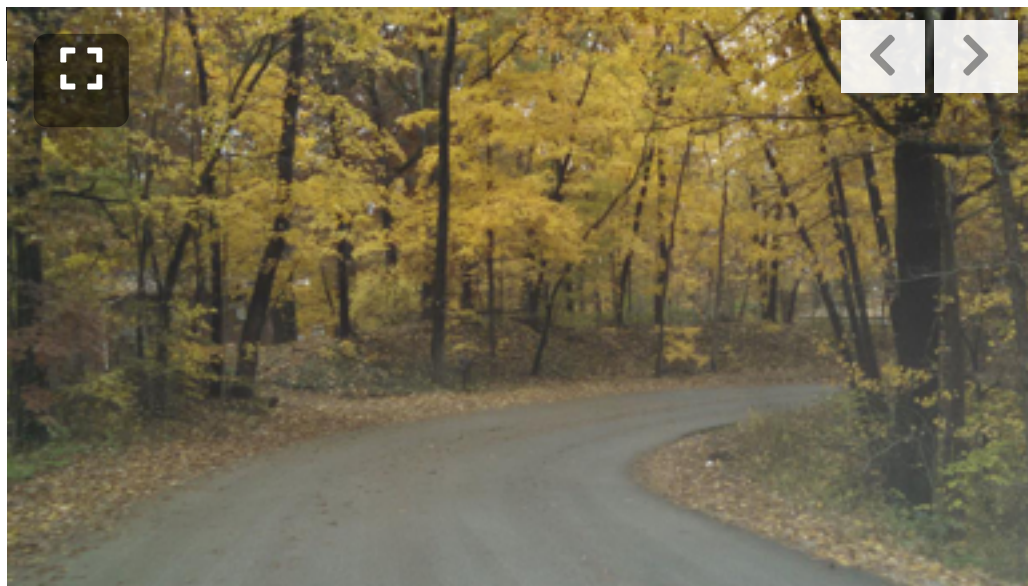
FEATURED

# Mother Nature's splendor: Autumn colors near their peak

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Nov 3, 2018

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The country roads of Morgan County are great to drive this time of year as each offers a new, picturesque view.

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## INDIANA

A late arriving cold snap preceded by unseasonably warm weather meant a delay to the change in the colors of the leaves, but this week, the fall fireworks show should be at its peak — and it's all thanks to Mother Nature.

Indiana Department of Natural Resources State Community and Urban Forestry Coordinator Carrie Tauscher said that a few different factors determine when leaves begin to change.

“Generally speaking, trees don’t just go, ‘Oh, it’s Oct. 14. I should be red now,’” Tauscher said. “They respond to the weather patterns and the temperature changes in their environment, and then they follow suit. They needed those indicators to start basically retrenching the chlorophyll in their leaves — so pulling the chlorophyll back out.” “Chlorophyll is really expensive for them to make, and so one of the indicators that trees use are colder temperatures to say, ‘Oh, the days are getting shorter, there’s less sunlight, the temperatures are cooler. I’d better pull all my little solar panels back because I’m going to be dropping these leaves because they’re not going to be very functional all winter.’”

Tauscher said the most important ingredients for the best fall color is cool nighttime temperatures and warm, sunny days.

Another factor that impacts the quality of fall leaf color is drought.

“If you remember, right before the State Fair, there was three- to five-week drought,” Tauscher said. “It wasn’t an extreme drought. It wasn’t anything at the magnitude of 2012, but trees were really dry and thirsty, and cottonwoods were starting to turn

yellow in August,” Tauscher said. “And that was because of drought stress. And drought stress, generally speaking, is an inhibitor of good fall color. “A tree’s goal isn’t to give us good fall colors. It’s to retrench its chlorophyll and abscise — or drop — their leaves.”

She said that when a tree is thirsty, it makes it more difficult to pull the chlorophyll back out, and trees will drop leaves that are still green.

“So you’re seeing that a lot around here, where half of them are yellow and half of them are green, because of all the great gusty windstorms we’ve been having recently and the rain now,” Tauscher said. “Green leaves are dropping just as fast as the pretty orange and yellow ones.”

The color of leaves is also determined by the species of tree, Tauscher said, as some trees are better at pulling back certain chemicals and compounds than others. Just as different types of colors in fireworks are produced by the burning of different metal salts, different colors in leaves are determined by the chemicals and compounds left behind when chlorophyll is withdrawn.

“It’s just kind of what that tree is least efficient at drawing back into the trunk, basically, that you’re seeing,” Tauscher said. “Some you’ll see orange, some you’ll see yellow.”

Another reason the leaves seem to be changing later is due to an invasive species: the emerald ash

borer.

“You also have to remember a lot of our communities have now gone through emerald ash borer, and ash tends to show their fall color earlier in the fall season than other species do,” Tauscher said.

“So when you’re talking about that variability, the bright golds and the deep purples that you would have normally seen from our ash trees aren’t there in those communities anymore because they’ve all been killed by emerald ash borer, so that’s something for people to remember — the reason some of that fall color is missing is because the tree species has been attacked.”

Another reason colors might seem less impactful is the types of trees in the state. Indiana has a lot of oaks that, Tauscher said, tend not to be too flashy in their leaf colors.

“Some scarlet oaks can be really be beautiful, some red oaks can really beautiful, even within individual species of trees, so if we say red oak, there might be individuals that are really, really bright in vibrant red colors, and there might be other red oaks that get kind of a mottled purple-y color,” Tauscher said.

“So just like people, trees are individuals and beyond the environmental impact, each individual might be a little different in the colors they produce in the fall.”

She said that the delay in fall colors probably didn't impact plans people had in the fall.

"For all intents and purposes, people tend to do the fall stuff when they have time in the fall," Tauscher said. "I don't think families didn't camp during fall break because the colors weren't perfect; they still went camping during fall break because that's what they do."

Tosha Daugherty, Executive Director of Visit Morgan County, said that the late arriving colors hadn't really impacted tourism in the county.

"We will get the predictions for the year before we start prepping for the fall, just to figure out when that peak color might be happening," Daugherty said. "Like this year, it was a little bit later than normal, so we actually had done a lot of the festival promotion before the color hit, so we actually got a little more mileage out of them because we were able to promote the festival and our leaves separately."

Daugherty said that the number of festivals happening throughout the fall months draws in visitors, and they weren't only visiting the county just for the leaves.

Fall foliage is big business in Brown County, and the county's Visitor Bureau Public Relations Coordinator Aubrey Sitzsman said what draws people to the county is the density of trees and the types of species found in the area.

"I think people like Brown County obviously because of the foliage, and I think it's special here because we have a lot of different kinds of maple trees maybe other places in the state don't have, and those are the ones that really show the bright colors," Sitzsman said. "And also just the concentration of trees we have just because we are so densely forested. It's kind of all around you, whereas in the city, unless you kind of get away,

you may see a few trees, but you just don't see all the colors lumped together like you do here."

Though the coldsnap meant a later start for the change in the leaves, Sitzman said they'd seen some positives from it, such as increased travel during the week.

"We have kind of seen midweek travel go up this year. I'm sure that's because the weather was warm and kids were out on fall break and they all kind of fell on multiple weeks, so our midweek travel was up and then our weekends stayed strong like they usually do," Sitzman said.

She said that visitors come to Brown County for reasons beyond the fall foliage, they also come for the shops and their fall decorations as well as the flavors of fall like pumpkin and caramel apple.

"So a lot of people can still enjoy that aspect and the flavors of fall even if the leaves aren't quite at their peak," Sitzman said. "And then by the season extending on in to November, we love it because we still continue to get traffic to push us right into the holiday season."

Tauscher encouraged nature lovers to get out there and enjoy it, regardless of the state of the foliage.

"Just go out, enjoy nature. See what it looks like this year, enjoy what it is this year because next year it will be a little bit different, and that's part of how



awesome our forests and our environment is," she said. "It's not the same every year. It's not the same postcard every time. That variation just adds to what kind of makes it so beautiful."

"We'll never have a Vermont fall because we don't have that many sugar maples. Not nearly the level of sugar maple/conifer mixes that they have for their beautiful postcards, but we have individual trees and other landscape vistas that are really unique to our state and we can enjoy them for what they are."

She said the best way to know when fall colors are at their peak are for visitors to call the property they intend to visit ahead of time.

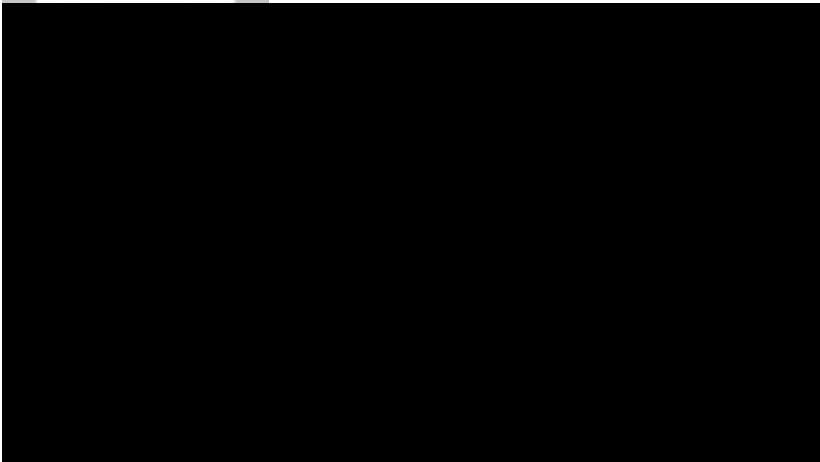




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