

# UNCOMMON TREES & SHRUBS WITH OUTRAGEOUS FALL COLOR

by Eugene W. Coffman

October is a prime month of the year for color in our Iowa gardens and woods. Our native maples, oaks, ashes, and sumacs are well known for their great fall color. Less well known are outstanding uncommon trees and shrubs that give us a riot of color in autumn.

Among the shrubs, one of the finest for fall color is the **Oakleaf Hydrangea** [*Hydrangea quercifolia*], which boasts yellow, orange, and red shades on large oak-like leaves. It thrives in sun or shade, making it a very versatile shrub.

Another of the finest is the Virginia Sweetspire [*Itea virginiana* ‘**Henry’s Garnet**’] which has spectacular fluorescent orange-red color. Again, it’s good in the sun or shade.

Add to your shopping list the Fothergilla. Choose from **F. gardenii** ‘**Blue Mist**’, **F. g.** ‘**Mt. Airy**’, or **Fothergilla major**, all of which have rich yellow-orange-red coloration and all of which tolerate sun or shade.

Ah—the Aronias—the Black and Red Chokeberries! The cultivar, **Aronia arbutifolia** ‘**Brilliantissima**’ (the red chokeberry), has a lustrous dark green leaf turning bright scarlet in the fall. The black Chokeberry cultivar, **Aronia melanocarpa** ‘**Viking**’ also has a beautiful dark green glossy leaf, but turns a deep wine red for fall. The Aronias appreciate sun or half shade.

Our favorite group of shrubs and small trees are the Viburnums. We love them for their three-season value, especially the fall foliage, and clusters of berries in

all colors. For barn-red fall leaf colors, we should single out **Viburnum sieboldii** ‘**Wavecrest**’, **Viburnum burkwoodii** ‘**Mohawk**’, and **Viburnum nudum** ‘**Winterthur**’. Most of our Viburnums color well, ranging from red-purple hues to more subtle russet tones. Once again, these are versatile—plant them in sun or shade.

Mention must also be made of the **Summersweet Clethras**, with strongly fragrant late summer flowers followed by rich golden fall foliage. They grow in sun or shade. These include the dwarf form ‘**Hummingbird**’, the red-flowered ‘**Ruby Spice**’, and the large **Clethra paniculata**.

A new large shrub or small tree (20’) that puts on its show all September and October is the **Seven Son Flower**, *Heptacodium miconioides*. It does so with profuse fragrant flowers covering the tree from the last week of August through September, then the calyx of the flower turns a nice red the month of October. It has an attractive large leaf that stays green well into November before it turns yellow. The bark is beautiful all year—a mottled tan that peels away in long strips. It will grow in sun or shade. [TWG Editor: You’ve read about this small tree in previous TWG issues. In fact, I first saw it at Gene Coffman’s nursery, where it has assumed a very nice vase shape. You can see more comments about it at weedpatch.com, along with a few photographs.]

Top honors for trees with outstanding fall color go to the **American Smoke Tree**, *Cotinus obovatus*. It is said to have

the most intense orange color of any native American tree. Hardy into Minnesota and a lover of limestone, it is a choice selection for our upper Midwest gardens. You can grow it in sun or part shade.

The native “burning bush” is actually a small tree to 15’. The **Eastern Wahoo** [*Euonymus atropurpureus*] is certainly near the top of the list for its flaming red foliage, complemented by small triangular seeds, bright orange, that light up the tree. Grow this in full sun for best effect.

Among our maple selections are small Oriental trees that rival or exceed our own sugar maple for gorgeous fall color. The best are: the **Full Moon Maple** [*Acer japonicum*]; the **Manchurian Maple** [*Acer manshuricum*]; the **Painted Maple** [*Acer truncatum ssp. mono*]; the **Purplebloom Maple** [*Acer pseudosieboldianum*]; *Acer tschonoskii ssp. koreanum*; and the **Three Flowered Maple** [*Acer triflorum*]. These are tough, hardy trees that have the virtue of remaining small, in the 20-30’ range, and they do well in sun or part shade.

Last but not least is the tree that lights up New England, the **Tupelo** [*Nyssa sylvatica*]. This handsome tree sports a beautiful glossy green foliage all summer that turns a fire red in fall. 🌳

*Eugene W. “Doc” Coffman* owns *Ridge Road Nursery*, 3195 Catherine Road, in Bellevue, IA. (319) 583-1381 or [ecoff@mwc.net](mailto:ecoff@mwc.net). Please call before visiting. TWG Editor: It’s simply a very, very cool nursery. Don’t miss a trip to it—just across the river from Galena!