



## Leaf Peeping Central Valley Style

by Sharon Plein, UC Master Gardener

"Leaf peeping" or autumn foliage viewing is a favorite fall pastime for people across the United States. In the eastern United States, peak peeping season starts in September and runs through October. Of course, this all depends on climate conditions and weather. Here in California's Central Valley, we also enjoy a "leaf peeping" season. Our PPP (Prime Peeping Potential) usually begins in late October to early November and runs early December. Look around your neighborhood or local parks and appreciate the change of color.

You may be inspired to include trees and other plants that provide Ginkgo (*Ginkgo biloba*): These beautiful trees have yellow to gold fall color. The leaves remain on the tree for several weeks and then seem to fall all at once. If you are going to plant one of these trees, be sure to buy a grafted variety male tree to avoid the smelly fruits, and give it plenty of room to grow. They are medium sized trees and are relatively slow growing. Male trees do produce a lot of pollen.



Sweet gum or Liquidamber (*Liquidamber styraciflua*): Liquidamber trees have more than just amber foliage in the fall. Deep purple, red, orange and yellow leaves occur on the same tree, sometimes on the same branch. Liquidamber trees are medium to large in size and produce large fruits that are sometimes called Sweet gum balls. If you plant this tree be prepared to rake its prickly fruit along with the fallen leaves.

Crape Myrtle (*Lagerstroemia indica*) is a tree or multi-branched large shrub. There are many different varieties or hybrids of crape myrtles and they are commonly planted in our area. They are beautiful in the summer with their profusion of flowers in shades of white, pink, red and purple. They also produce brilliant autumn foliage in shades of orange and gold that linger through our warm fall season.

Maple trees provide brilliant color in the northeast part of the country, but there are only a few that tolerate our heat and soils. Autumn Glory and Brandywine are two varieties of red maples (*Acer rubrum*) that you may have seen around town. In the fall you can't miss their orange to red foliage. Japanese maples (*Acer palmatum*) are common in our area. Many of these small to medium sized trees feature airy delicate foliage with red stems and red to purple leaves year round. The red leafed varieties need some shade to prevent leaf burn. Green leafed varieties more easily tolerate our bright sunny days. Some Japanese maples have an interesting open or weeping structure. They grow well in containers and add interest to any landscape, no matter the season.



Red Maple Tree

Chinese Pistache (*Pistacia chinensis*) trees are a reliable street and landscape tree in the valley. They are medium to large trees that do well in full sun and tolerate our dry conditions. Their foliage turns from yellow to orange to red in the fall and the trees seem to glow with their own light. They have small inedible berries that turn black as they mature. Many Chinese Pistache trees are planted throughout the county in parks and median strips.

In the autumn, our landscape plantings seem refreshed by cooler temperatures and, if we are lucky, a little rain. A variety of shrubs and vines provide beautiful counterpoint to the blaze of color from our local trees. The red berries of heavenly bamboo (*Nandina domestica*) and toyon (*Heteromeles spp*), and the orange berries of firethorn (*Pyracantha spp.*) also provide additional color. The glossy green leaves and black berries of myrtle (*Myrtus communis*) and Indian Hawthorn (*Rhaphiolepis spp.*), along with the various green shades of evergreens, grasses, and vines, complements the scene.

You don't have to travel to New England to be bedazzled by autumn foliage. Take your walking shoes and your camera and go for a local walk-about. Visit our area parks and admire the foliage in your own neighborhood. Be sure to enjoy our "leaf peeping" season this fall.

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