



The Green Of Autumn

By Monroe S. Miller

The colors we all think of when we think of autumn are slowly beginning to show up on the golf course as I write these lines. The sumac has been showing red for a few weeks already. There is a hint of yellow in the ash trees; soon the maples will be ready for their annual color display.

Gold. Red. Yellow and scarlet. Flame. Burgundy, orange, maroon. These colors and all those in between are the ones almost all of us think of when we think of fall. Most golf course superintendents enjoy their golf courses the most when the fall color reaches its peak. The scenes are breathtaking.

The plants that provide this annual display in the north central and the northeast are all-Americans; they are plants that have evolved over the millennia with an ability to withstand our brutal climate, especially the winter months. They are natives to North America. The brilliant fall color display tells us they are hurrying to get into winter condition. The time from first color to leaf fall is really short.

And they aren't fooled by temperatures or frost (or the lack of it). The hardening processes are triggered by daylength. A late October cold wave will never catch these colorful plants unprepared. This autumnal brilliance is pronounced in the plants that are native Americans.

Did you ever wonder why, when so many plants are rushing into winter preparedness, that our golf course grasses are the greenest they've been all year?

I've been hinting at the reason, if you noticed. The key is "native".

Virtually all of the green of autumn that you see east of the Mississippi is European in heritage. The common bluegrasses we sow and maintain are from Europe. When our ancestors came to America there weren't any bluegrasses here. There weren't any creeping bentgrasses. Or ryes. Or fescues. No, there weren't any redtops, either. They all came to us with the ear-

liest settlers. So did clover and timothy and lots of other meadow grasses.

Most of these grasses were not brought here intentionally. Virtually all came as seed in the hay for livestock on the sailing ships, as seed in packing material on those same ships or as mattress stuffing the immigrants brought with them. They came as seeds contaminating food and forage crop seed. As everybody knows, grass seeds are so small that millions of them occupy virtually no room. The grasses we nurture and maintain so lovingly on our golf courses are here by accident — illegal immigrants of sorts!

The reason they are so green when native American plants are retreating from that color goes to their European heritage. Autumns and winters on that continent are very different from ours. Fall comes on very slowly in northern Europe — some say you need to be in England in the fall to fully appreciate that fact. The season crawls and creeps toward Christmas in misty, rainy cool weather. By the time the Christmas season is over, the mild and nearly nonexistent winter is too. Spring flowers begin to bloom. The climate in Europe isn't as violent as ours is here in the U.S. They don't have the hot and violent summers or the clear and cold winters.

So these lawn and meadow grasses, these European immigrants, stay green because it is in their genes. It's in the genes of beech trees and of myrtle. The green of English oak and Norway maple lasts well into the autumn. So does the green of cultivated apple trees from Europe.

Don't get me wrong — I'm certainly not complaining about the green of autumn. I'm actually extremely grateful for this time of extra green when everything else is taking on autumn hues. The green of our golf courses sets up fantastic color contrasts with all of the bright yellows and reds of fall. For me, it's the green of the golf courses that makes them especially beautiful in the

fall. The green amplifies the color of the trees and shrubs and ground covers and vines.

Drive through the Wisconsin countryside in fall. Find a place that isn't being farmed or cultivated or pastured. What you'll see are all the colors EXCEPT green — our native grasses turn away from green in the fall like the rest of our native plants. Despite the brilliance of a woodland or swamp, I think the scene would be even prettier with more green. Also notice, as you move toward farms or closer to towns and villages, how much more green there is. It widens out in pastures and meadows and lawns. And golf courses. Note the spectacular contrasts.

Nearly every fall while Cheryl and I are leafpeeping in New England we read an article in some newspaper discussing the merits of the fall color in Vermont and New Hampshire. Usually these are arguments over "whose is best?" I always vote for Vermont for one simple reason. That state has more green. She has more active farms, more cultivated and pastured ground that offers up a green reference to the great red and yellow fall color of the mountains.

So I guess I'm really glad that our golf courses are their greenest of the year in fall. For those of us descended from European stock, it seems we owe our ancestors not only for our own heritage, not only for the great game we work with, but also for the green color of this already very colorful season.

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