



Vine Maple • Photo by Eileen Flory

## Taking in the local color

*“Everyone must take time to sit and watch the leaves turn.”*

—Elizabeth Lawrence, American landscape architect and gardener, 1904–1985

by Eileen Flory • For the Oregon Coast TODAY

There’s an autumn sport that comes with a crunch underfoot, a tangy scent, and a dazzle of color. In Japan they call it momijigari. In some parts of the United States, they let school out for a week in October so families can participate. It’s called leaf peeping, and it’s time to add it to our coastal collection of autumn activities.

Here in the land of Sitka spruce and shore pine, leaf peeping is more likely to bring on a gentle

“Oooh” or “Aaah” than a New England “OMG!” But we value those pockets of color all the more because of the way they are interwoven with the infinite greens of our forests. The colors signal our forest’s diversity — a diversity often hidden in other seasons.

So by all means, go whale watching, beachcombing, or dune riding. Slurp some chowder. Get ready to snuggle up for a storm. And then head out to the woods for some good, Oregon coast–style leaf peeping.

### A little leaf chemistry

Spruces, pines, hemlocks, and other trees with needles for leaves are more or less impervious to our climate’s storms and flying salt. Their tiny needles, which drop gradually throughout the year, present little surface area to be damaged. And many of our coastal broadleaf plants don’t drop their leaves all at once, either; the tough, leathery leaves of salal, evergreen huckleberry, wax myrtle, and twinberry stay green and hold up well through the wintertime.

Millions of years after the appearance of coniferous trees, Mother Nature began to experiment with another strategy: seasonal leaf-shedding. Sometime during the Cretaceous Period, Tyrannosaurus rex trod on some of the first deciduous plants. For those plants and their descendants, it paid to shed leaves to better survive winter storms and munching bugs — and besides, why put out the effort to maintain leaves in a season when it’s not sunny?

During the spring and summer, a deciduous tree’s leaves, full of a green pigment called chlorophyll, busily make food for the tree by absorbing sunlight into the chlorophyll. In this most elemental of processes, photosynthesis, the leaf uses only the sun’s energy to change the air’s carbon dioxide and the earth’s water into sugars that nourish the tree.

Lurking under a leaf’s green color all summer long are yellow and orange pigments that are also present in many living things, from carrots to canaries. With the shorter days and cooler temperatures of fall, the plant stops replenishing its chlorophyll and the leaves’ food factories shut down. Green colors disappear, allowing the yellow and orange to come to the fore.

Add in some red pigments that now develop, and we leaf peepers are treated to a range of fall colors

from clear yellow to dark maroon. We have to catch the season quickly, though; as the colors are turning, the trees are also growing a corky layer of cells where each leaf stem meets its twig. As soon as a stiff wind blows, it carries the leaf away.

### **Special species for coastal color**

Vine maple, *Acer circinatum*, blazes red and yellow from stream banks and hillsides. Never the tallest tree in the forest, it needs to spread its leaves out horizontally to catch as much summer sun as possible, so in the fall, vine maple presents its colors carefully, as if from an open hand.

Oregon, or bigleaf, maple, *Acer macrophyllum*, resembles nothing other than a great yellow gumdrop in the fall. Its huge leaves, once fallen, are perfect for scuffling.

Cascara, or chittum, *Rhamnus purshiana*, usually hides in the woods, seldom noticed by passers-by. But come autumn, its drooping, oval, yellow leaves give it away.

Red alder, *Alnus rubra*, often musters a bit of yellow before its leaves turn brown on the branch.

Alder's preference for river and stream banks makes those areas glow subtly in autumn.

Wild cucumber, or manroot, *Marah oreganus*, climbs up trees and bushes in the woods. It is one of the first plants to turn color in the fall; its large, yellow leaves signal the beginning of the end of summer.

### **Where to go for leaf peeping**

In mid to late October, most back roads, trails, and creeks offer good leaf peeping territory. A few sure locations in Lincoln and Tillamook Counties:

- Beaver Creek State Natural Area, south of Newport, [www.oregonstateparks.org/park\\_261.php](http://www.oregonstateparks.org/park_261.php), 541-867-7451 Drive or bike Beaver Creek Road east from Ona Beach State Park and head for the Welcome Center, or download a trail guide from the Internet, and enjoy marsh and forest colors on foot, by kayak, or by canoe.
- Drift Creek Falls trail, east of Lincoln City [[More info.](#)] Head east on Drift Creek Road to the trailhead and hike a mile and a half through evergreens and spectacular vine maples to the falls and suspension bridge. You'll need a \$5 Northwest Forest Pass, available online, or you can pay for your permit on site.
- Tillamook Forest Center, east of Tillamook, [www.tillamookforestcenter.org](http://www.tillamookforestcenter.org), (503) 815-6800, toll free 866-930-4646. Drive, or take a \$1 ride on the bus called The Wave, 21 miles east of Tillamook on Oregon Hwy. 6. Your journey will be as beautiful as your destination. The interpretive center has a variety of programs that explain the area's human and natural history.

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