

Fall's Best Out West

Some of my favorite places for powerful fall landscapes are west of the Rockies. What are you waiting for? Get behind the wheel and let fall color be your guide.

BY KARIN LEPERI PLACITAS, NEW MEXICO

Autumn puts on a spectacular color show along the Virgin River in Zion National Park.

PHOTO BY DENNIS FRATES

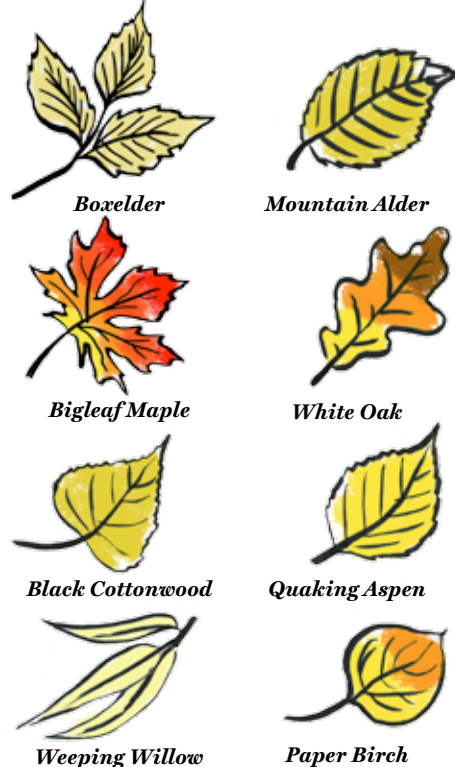
An aspen grove near the San Francisco Peaks glows in the sun.



When days shorten and cooler temps trend, fall foliage erupts across the country at different times each year. Based on nature's equation of latitude, altitude, temperature and precipitation, various trees and shrubs exchange their greenery for the fiery finery of autumn.

While the Northeast is known for blazing displays of red, orange and yellow sugar maples, the West is known for majestic landscapes accentuated by yellow aspens and cottonwoods and crimson maples. Fall colors complement wide-open spaces and rugged cliffs rather than dominate the scene. Here is a guide to five must-see destinations for autumn color.

Common Leaves & Colors



JIM COLE, PHOTOGRAPHER/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; OPPOSITE, LONDIE GARCIA PADELSKY

ARIZONA

San Francisco Peaks

At about 7,000 feet above sea level, Flagstaff is a favorite leaf-peeping destination among Arizonans. This old outpost sits at the base of the San Francisco Peaks, a dormant volcanic mountain range boasting aspen groves that shimmer in gold every fall. When the peaks turn in October, visitors flock from across the Southwest to experience the impressive spectacle.

A network of trails winds through the peaks, giving hikers of all levels a close-up view of the mountains beneath a canopy of aspens. If you would prefer a bird's-eye view, ride the ski lift at Arizona Snowbowl (arizonasnowbowl.com).

Travel Guide

WHEN TO GO October–November

COLORS YOU'LL SEE Yellow–gold (aspen), green (pine)

SCENIC DRIVE Around the Peaks Loop encircles Humphrey's Peak, the highest point in Arizona. As the route winds through aspen groves and open prairies, there are plenty of spots to pull over to picnic or simply photograph the view.

WHERE TO HIKE The trail to Wilson Meadow is an easy 2-mile round-trip hike featuring wildlife and forests ablaze in color. Popular for birding, Wilson is one of several meadows located in Hart Prairie in the Coconino National Forest.

MORE TO EXPLORE Route 66 runs right through Flagstaff, and the downtown is rich with history, restaurants and local shops. flagstaffarizona.org

INSIDERS TIP Flagstaffarizona.org/leafometer gives up-to-date reports on Flagstaff's fall foliage.



The view from June Lake Loop dazzles as gold and granite reflect in clear water.

CALIFORNIA

June Lake

Travel Guide

WHEN TO GO Early October

COLORS YOU'LL SEE Yellow–gold and burnished orange (aspen); green and dark green (ponderosa pine, lodgepole pine, western white pine, whitebark pine, mountain hemlock)

WHERE TO HIKE For an overload of yellow-laden aspens in the fall, hike the 4-mile round-trip trail to Parker Lake. In addition to the main attraction, this very popular and relatively easy trail rewards hikers with awesome views of Mono Lake and the Mono Craters.

WHERE TO BIKE The June Lake Loop offers riders plenty of jaw-dropping views along the way. The elevation gain is moderate, so the trek is a bit of a workout. But the effort is worth it—this ride is considered one of the more beautiful in the Eastern Sierra.

MORE TO EXPLORE Be sure to visit nearby Mono Lake Tufa State Natural Reserve, home to intriguing limestone formations and millions of migratory and nesting birds. parks.ca.gov



A carpet of color contrasts with the snow on Garden Wall in Glacier. Right: Aspens at peak color.

MONTANA

Glacier National Park

For dramatic fall landscapes, it's hard to beat Going-to-the-Sun Road over Logan Pass in Glacier National Park. A snakelike highway that seems to melt into the sun, the 50-mile, two-lane road was named after a Blackfoot Indian spirit who came to earth and returned to the sky via the mountain.

Here in the northern Rockies, an explosion of colors contrasts starkly against cedar, evergreens and snow-covered jagged peaks. The golds and yellows from aspen and western larch, oranges and reds from ash, and huckleberry crimson provide a blazing palette of nature's glory. Amid air as crisp as Winesap

apples, expect to encounter wildlife such as mountain goats, bighorn sheep, elk, moose and even grizzlies along the way as they prepare for the long winter ahead.

Travel Guide

WHEN TO GO September for aspen, birch, cottonwood and huckleberry; mid-October for western larch

COLORS YOU'LL SEE Yellow-gold (aspen, birch, cottonwood, western larch); orange (Rocky Mountain maple); orange-red (mountain ash); crimson (huckleberry); green (evergreens, juniper, cypress)

WHERE TO HIKE For the best hiking experience among yellowing larch (also known as tamarack), choose any of the trails from Sperry Trail-head near Lake McDonald Lodge. This is bear country, so take safety precautions and dress for variable weather conditions.

WHERE TO BIKE Just outside of the park you'll find an easy ride along an old railroad bed that became a bike trail. The path follows the old rail route past several highlights in the Flathead Valley, including Whitefish and Flathead lakes. railstotrailsofnwmt.com

WHERE TO CAMP The fall season is a fantastic time to sleep under the stars in Glacier, and after Labor Day, all camping is first come, first served. The only auto campgrounds open by Nov. 1 are the Apgar and St. Mary campgrounds, both of which have no fees during the winter. nps.gov/glacier

INSIDERS TIP If you want to avoid crowds, consider visiting in the fall. You will, however, have to be self-sufficient, as many concessions will close down for the season.

CHUCK HANEY





Orange foliage frames a covered bridge in Lane County, Oregon.

OREGON

Willamette Valley

The Willamette Valley is defined by a namesake river flowing from the Cascades through bountiful farmlands and carpeted vineyards that turn yellow, gold and brown with the shorter days of fall. The Portland area, Salem and Eugene are replete with leaf-peeping spots—many from main highways—while the Cottage Grove Covered Bridge Tour provides a romantic twist with

rustic barns and covered bridges framed in vibrant fall color. Drive or explore on a bike (rideoregonride.com). Don't forget to stop at the old country schoolhouses and barns that dot the landscape.

Travel Guide

WHEN TO GO Mid-August to late November (peak is mid-October)

COLORS YOU'LL SEE Yellow-gold (bigleaf maple, birch, Oregon ash, aspen, alder and larch); orange (oak); burgundy (dogwood); red and crimson (vine maple and huckleberry)

SCENIC DRIVE The McKenzie Pass-Santiam Pass Scenic Byway is a favorite drive among locals. Along the way, you will be dazzled by a kaleidoscope of colors. The bright trees range from yellowing bigleaf and crimson vine maples to golden aspen—all set against a backdrop of green Douglas firs and ponderosa pines, black lava rock and crisp cerulean skies.

WHERE TO HIKE The Trail of Ten Falls in Silver Falls State Park winds through dense forest, passing 10 spectacular waterfalls in a little over 7 miles. It's less than an hour's

drive east of Salem, in the foothills of Oregon's Cascade Mountains. oregonstateparks.org

SIDE TRIP The wonders of Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area are about an hour outside of the valley. Hike to Benson Bridge or continue to the top of the falls. www.fs.usda.gov/crgnsa

CROWD PLEASER For a different twist to fall, celebrate at the annual Mushroom & Music Festival, Oct. 30 at Mount Pisgah Arboretum. mountpisgaharboretum.com

STEVE TERRILL; OPPOSITE, TERRY DONNELLY



Bigleaf maples transform Multnomah Falls and the Benson Bridge into fall perfection.



In Zion,
this vibrant
bigtooth maple
sets ablaze the
North Fork of
the Virgin River.

UTAH

Zion National Park

Although high desert and canyon lands don't usually come to mind in connection with fall colors, Zion is a giant exception because of its slot canyons, mesas, high plateaus, monolithic cliffs and huge variations in elevation. Come autumn, it can be ablaze with yellows and reds.

The bonus? Fall color comes later in the canyons and riparian areas because of a lower elevation and milder climate, so you can extend the foliage-viewing season. And, temperatures are milder in fall.

Look for Fremont cottonwood trees laden with brilliant leaves of

school bus yellow and burnished gold. You'll find them in canyons by creeks and riverbeds.

Travel Guide

WHEN TO GO Early November

COLORS YOU'LL SEE Dull yellow (boxelder); yellow-gold (Fremont cottonwood along streams); red and crimson (maple)

WHERE TO HIKE Trails abound in Zion. You'll find red-splashed maples along the Riverside Walk. For cottonwoods and boxelder trees, hike the Emerald Pools trails and river areas. In particular, Lower Emerald Pool Trail is excellent any time of year. It's a favorite hike for families, because many trees shade the paved trail.

PHOTOGRAPH Don't miss the iconic view of the Watchman from Canyon Junction Bridge. When cottonwood leaves turn yellow about the first week in November, they add a crowning glory to this majestic image, especially in late afternoon. That's when the light transforms mountaintops and canyon walls into a diffusion of glowing reds and golds. However, be prepared to share the bridge with several photographers and their tripods.

CROWD PLEASER Expect to find artists as well as avid landscape photographers along the trails during the Plein Air Art Invitational, which takes place the second week in November. The week ends with an auction and a sale of paintings. zionpark.org 🌞

MARY LIZ AUSTIN