

FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN!

by UCCE Tuolumne County Master Gardener
Francie McGowan

When I talk about “Fire on the Mountain,” I don’t mean the hot, destructive kind of fire we all dread every summer in the foothills, but the **wild, exciting fall color** that lights up the landscape with dappled yellows, brilliant oranges, and fire engine reds in autumn. Although we all love the evergreen trees and shrubs that proliferate throughout the Sierra, wouldn’t it be exciting to have a burst of color in the waning days of the year? Flocks of tourists make the pilgrimage to New England to see the turning of the leaves every October. They are called leaf peepers back East and they travel thousands of miles to see the display.

As you travel up the mountains of the Sierra, the flora becomes more and more evergreen. I have made an effort to change this in my 4,400 foot-elevation garden. There are **many deciduous trees and shrubs that turn color in the fall** and aren’t put off by the altitude or the snowy winters. They are lush and green in the spring, some flowering in the summer, and all catch fire in the shortening days of September and October. As the warm days and crisp nights of autumn stop the manufacturing of chlorophyll in these plants, a kaleidoscope of colors surface and create a palette that would make even Leonardo da Vinci jealous.

The **Japanese maple** (*Acer palmatum*) is one of the easiest to grow in a climate that is snow-bound in the winter. It grows best in zones 6 – 9 and should be planted in a shady or partly shady spot in the garden. The colors range from reds to oranges and yellows at season’s end and put on a spectacular show in the landscape. It is best to leave the fallen leaves on the ground for mulch to protect the roots from freezing in the winter. When spring emerges, they will begin to decay into rich compost, adding nutrients to the soil.

The **dogwood tree** (*Cornus kousa*) is beautiful all during the year. It is well known in the foothills and, though it is mostly loved for the beautiful pink or white flowers it produces in the spring, it also has lovely purplish-red tones in the fall. It grows best in zones 5 – 8 and should be planted in sun to partial shade.

One of the brightest shrubs in my autumn garden is the **burning bush** (*Euonymus alatus*) which turns bright red and looks like it is on fire. I have planted many of these throughout the garden to create “hot spots” of color. This plant thrives in zones 4 – 8 and should be planted in full sun. (Note: burning bush is invasive in the Eastern United States where it has invaded woodlands; it is not listed on the Cal IPC invasive weed list for California.)

Another stunner is the **Chinese pistachio** (*Pistache chinensis*). It turns neon red-orange in the fall and can be seen sizzling from quite a distance. It is quite pest resistant and drought tolerant. They should be planted in full sun, though mine seems fine in partial shade.

Autumn joy sedum (*Sedum herbstfreude*) is an excellent plant for our area. It is drought tolerant, grows in almost any soil and turns a beautiful, soft maroon in the fall. I even cut the tops off of some and just stuck them in the ground in another part of the garden and they grew! They are hardy, hardy, hardy.

There are quite a few **California native trees and shrubs** that have exciting fall color, as well:

- Quaking aspen (*Populus tremuloides*)
- black oak (*Quercus kelloggii*)
- and barberry shrubs (*Berberis*)

to name a few.

We too can have the fall splash of color that the East Coast enjoys every year. Why go all the way across the country when we can have our own fall foliage right here? So, what are you waiting for, Sierra mountaineers? Let's get out there and ignite those mountains!

Francie McGowan is a recent graduate of the UCCE Tuolumne County Master Gardener training class. Retired in this area (4,000 feet up) for the last five years, she's still learning about gardening in the Sierras.