

YELLOW LEAVES SET OFF TREES AND SHRUBS

by Ray Rothenberger

To many people, yellow leaves are sign of sickness in plants. In some cases this is true, due to a problem we call chlorosis, which may indicate root damage or some other type of injury. Chlorosis results when something interferes with the absorption or movement of certain elements. In other cases it may be direct absorption or movement due to an iron or other element deficiency.

However, there are perfectly healthy trees and shrubs that produce yellow or cream-colored foliage with very ornamental uses. These are normally selections of green-leaved types and have the same growth characteristics. Occasionally, plants that have colored foliage develop a branch that is solid green. When this happens it should be removed promptly. If not removed, the solid green portion gradually dominates, and the plant may lose its ornamental value.

Use plants with colored leaves sparingly in the landscape. They should be used as a focal point and not in great masses. Trees and shrubs are relatively permanent in the landscape. For this reason careful planning is necessary when selecting those with a dominant character such as yellow-colored leaves.

Perhaps the most popular of all plants with yellow foliage is the Vicary Golden Privet. This privet hybrid produces bright yellow leaves throughout the season. It sometimes suffers winter damage, but injured branches can be cut back. They normally quickly recover with vigorous new shoots of bright yellow leaves.

A more uncommon plant with yellow foliage is the Golden Elder. This relative of the elderberry grows very similarly and has tips of golden leaves that persist through much of the summer.

Golden Ninebark is another possible shrub selection with yellow leaves. Its leaves turn green by late summer. Although a very durable plant, it

generally appears as a coarse spirea and is less ornamental than the others. It is best as a background shrub.

There are also shrubs with white or yellow variegated leaves. These shrubs appear light green from a distance, but are more ornamental at close viewing. Possible shrub selections with variegated leaves would include the Variegated Wiegela, which has leaves edged in pale yellow. The variegated Siberian Dogwood has leaves bordered with white. The twigs develop red-colored bark in winter.

A few groundcover plants with variegated leaves include the Silver Queen Wintercreeper Euonymus and the variegated Plantain Lily, or Hosta. The Hosta has large leaves which show off their white and green foliage in a shady location.

The best representative of yellow color in tree foliage is the Sunburst Honeylocust. Yellow tips of branches are produced all during the summer while the tree is actively growing. As the leaves age, they develop a good green color.

The Harelequin Maple is a Norway maple with variegated leaves. Margins of the leaves are whitish.

Even evergreen plants may be obtained with yellow coloration in the foliage. The Golden Pfitzer Juniper has tips of twigs that are yellow. A very similar but smaller shrub is the Gold Thread False Cypress, which makes an interesting conversation piece in a mixed planting.

Landscape plants with leaf color other than yellow are also available for a variety of landscape uses.

*Extension Horticulture
University of Missouri
Columbia, Missouri*