

Nature's Beauty

Regardless of the record September temperatures we are enjoying in the Okanagan, we are most definitely headed into fall. I think maybe we 'deserve' these warm almost-fall days after enduring an unseasonably cool and wet June and July.

The fall season (my favourite) begins next Friday, September 23.

Typically, the cooler weather in September **appears** to bring on the glorious fall colours as plants have their final 'hurrah' before going into dormancy.

Did you know, though, it is actually the **shorter daylight hours** that is the catalyst for plants to begin preparing for winter?

To discuss how this process plays out, take a look at our native saskatoon (*Amelanchier alnifolia*), a plant that most Okanagan dwellers are familiar with. This species, also commonly called serviceberry, provides four seasons of interest in the landscape. We'll start with winter and end with fall.

During the winter, when the leaves do not obstruct the view, the multi-stemmed saskatoon maintains a presence in the landscape, particularly when there is snow on the ground and resting on its many branches. The bark on the older stems is grey; the less mature stems of the previous season are a spectacular rich deep red or purplish colour. I often include some young stems in my Christmas wreath.

Saskatoon is one of the first plants to emerge from winter dormancy with a full display of light green leaves. It does most of its growing in spring and early summer, when its leaves reach their mature colour of a medium green.

White flowers, although relatively short-lived, can be seen throughout the countryside in early to mid-spring. Berries that mature to a purple or almost black colour follow the blooms.

Similar to blueberries, saskatoon berries are chock full of dietary fibre, vitamins B₂ (riboflavin) and B₇ (biotin), and the essential minerals, iron and manganese. Aboriginals ate the berries fresh, dried in cakes and pemmican, and dried (like raisins).

Several folks have told me they do not particularly care for the taste of the saskatoon in the Okanagan – usually these are people who've enjoyed the larger, sweeter berries found in the prairie provinces. However, the birds enjoy them and deer will browse on their branches over winter.

As the Okanagan heat arrives, the plant tends to go into a bit of a summer dormancy. Then, as the days begin to shorten, the chlorophyll in the leaves is no longer required for photosynthesis, a plant's food-making and respiration mechanism.

As the chlorophyll (the green pigment in leaves) takes a back seat, other pigments such as red, orange and yellow, which are always in the leaves and contribute to the task of making food, come to the forefront. Although we do not see it, the plant continues to grow underground – in fact as much as 80% of root growth occurs in the fall.

Once the leaves drop the plant enjoys some rest, before beginning the cycle again.

Another character who likes the native saskatoon is our young dog, 'Ranger'. Earlier this year we discovered he liked to forage for the berries along one of our walking routes in Trout Creek. (If you don't quite believe me, or want to see for yourself, I have video footage of him leaving the path and picking berries off lower branches – just email us.)

Toni Boot is the founder and owner of Grasslands Nursery in Summerland, a nursery specializing in sustainable gardening. Comments and suggestions for future Water Wisdom columns may be directed to her at grassnursery@telus.net.