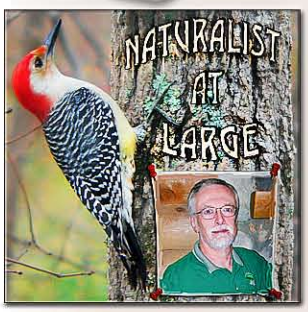
NATURALIST AT LARGE



Dan Farmer is a long-time Michigan Naturalist with a wide ranging interest in nature, heritage, and outdoor topics. He is currently the Naturalist for Shelby Township Michigan at Burgess-Shadbush Nature Center, in River Bends Park. He has served as naturalist at several nature centers in southeastern Michigan, taught graduate classes at Wayne State University, and done program presentations and consulting throughout the region. Dan specializes in plant and animal identification with a particular interest in insects and spiders.

FALL COLORS and GALLS

BY: ***Dan Farmer***
NATURALIST at the
BURGESS-SHADBUSH Center

Fall Colors

It seems impossible that fall is upon us again. One of the truly great things about fall in Michigan is the amazing color that plants provide. There is a widely believed myth that rainy weather produces great color. It does not. Color is produced when sugars are produced in leaves on sunny days and the green chlorophyll begins to decay. Other pigment levels increase and become dominant. Cool nights, acidity, and other factors affect the colors that we see. Damp days simply make the leaves shiny and more vibrant. Different plants reach their peak colors at different times depending on the yearly weather.

Later August and early September are great times to look for the very colorful Poison Sumac in swampy areas. The leaves of this sometimes troublesome plant turn a beautiful coppery red and make the plants stand out like they were labeled. Don't pick them for a leaf collection as the rash causing urushiol is still present in leaves, stems, and roots. The same goes for Poison Ivy, which turns a rather odd pink color. It is likely that a few leaf collections are submitted by students with an unexplained itchy rash.

It is said that the leaves of some plants turn to red to attract birds to their less than tasty berries. Maybe it is true in the natural world as well as the human world that the poorer the product the more advertising is needed to make a sale. I always notice the deep red color of the leaves of the vining Virginia Creeper with its blue-black berries (which resemble wild grapes but contain toxins). The similarly fruited wild grapes produce wonderfully sweet berry-like fruits (after frosts) but their leaves gradually turn a dull yellow. Wild grapes are eaten by more species of birds and mammals than any other Michigan fruit.

BY: *Dan Farmer*

NATURALIST AT LARGE

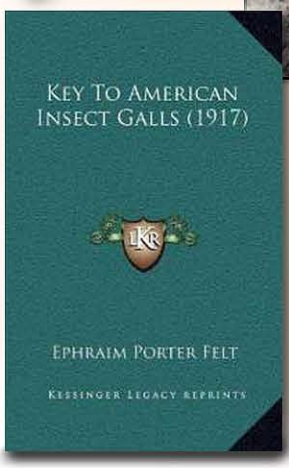
Galls

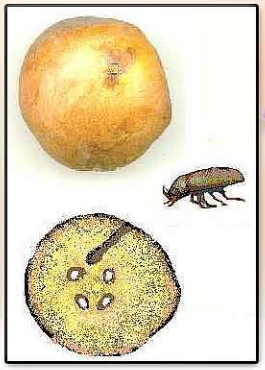
Fall is also a good time to look for galls. Galls are odd growths that can occur on about any part of a host plant depending on the species. Galls are often caused by insects, the animal "hi-jacks" the plant by chemically inducing it to grow an odd structure which becomes a food supply and a protective shelter for the developing insect larva. Leaves that fall often are more accessible to the gall seeker. After leaves fall twig and stem galls are easier to see as well. Recently I found a great work about galls for sale on-line. Titled Key to American Insect Galls by Ephraim Felt, this work was published in 1917!

From time to time I will try to include some pictures of galls you can watch for. In the mean time be sure to check out oak trees. With the abundance of Michigan oak species and with their proclivity to host gall makers, you are likely to have some success when you examine them. For identification you can check some on-line web sites. I have not found a site that is terribly complete, but if you do let me know at farmerd@shelbytwp.org. To get you started see if you can find an oak apple gall. These are green, walnut-sized galls that by mid-summer turn brown in Southern Michigan. I found them on a Red Oak or Red-Black Hybrid Oak. They are caused by a wasp and have been used in past times in the production of ink.

I wish you happy hiking and nature watching.

See you soon,
Dan Farmer





EDITOR NOTE: We very appreciate the informative and wonderful articles from naturalist, Dan Farmer. His expertise & many years of experience in and around natural things makes him a treasure trove of valuable information for all of us. Read more soon from Dan on his Blog at: **http://naturalistatlarge.wordpress.com/**