

Flaming Foliage

Sites help you plan excursions for leaf-watching

October is a bittersweet month in Pennsylvania. There are beautiful, sunny days and crisp, cool nights. Fall festivals, Friday night football and trips to the pumpkin patch fill up weekend schedules. Unfortunately, it inevitably leads to the long, gray winter:



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Of course, one of the best things about October around here is the changing foliage. This is the time of the month when it usually hits its peak, with flaming golds, oranges and reds painting the mountainsides. It's the perfect time to pack the family in the car for a ride in the countryside, or to take an overnight trip to one of the many scenic destinations around the state.

There are lots of websites dedicated to "leaf peepers" and foliage fanatics, and Pennsylvania isn't the only state with spectacular colors in the fall. New England, New York, New Jersey and several states south of the Mason-Dixon line all boast of brilliant colors this time of year. I'm sure they're all lovely, but if time or money are an issue — and when aren't they — then you might as well do your leaf watching closer to home, because our foliage is as good as it gets.

Following are reviews of three foliage websites, two of which focus on Pennsylvania:

www.visitpa.com

This site is actually the official tourism site for the state and focuses on much more than foliage, but it has a good section devoted to fall travel. When you visit the home page, click on the "Trip Ideas" tab in the middle of the page. Then in the left column click on "See More PA," which opens a drop-down menu below it. Clicking on the first item in that menu, "Fall in PA," takes you to the foliage page.

The page divides the state into three regions: Northern, Central and Southern. Clicking on a region brings you to a page with information about attractions and activities in that area. There are also preplanned road trips with itineraries for each day, maps and suggestions for dining and lodging.

A downloadable foliage report in PDF form that predicts when the colors will peak in each region is available. Finally, a slide show of beautiful foliage pictures from around the state caps off the page's features.

The site is professionally done with a cheery, colorful design and good navigation.

www.pavisnet.com

This is also a subsection of a general tourism site for the state, Pennsylvania Visitors Network, that focuses on fall travel. When you visit the home page, click on the "Fall in PA" link about one-third of the way down the page on the right side.

Scenic drives throughout the state are the main focus of this section. There's a color-coded map and links in the left column

that divide the state into three zones, much like the previous site. The dates for peak color are listed with each zone.

Clicking on a zone takes you to a list of suggested foliage cruises in that part of the state. The directions are written out in paragraph form with no maps, which makes it a little difficult to follow. A list format and maps would be more useful. However, there are many links within the

directions to local attractions, restaurants and inns that could be useful when planning a trip. Tabs at the top of the page also contain a wealth of useful links for the traveler.

The site is part of a larger, advertiser supported network of sites, U.S. Visitors Network, that focus on travel on the East and West coasts. It has a crowded design with garish colors and poor organization.

www.foliagenetwork.com

This is a site that is dedicated strictly to fall foliage in the United States. The home page has a slideshow of colorful foliage photos and some general information about the changing leaves. There's also a poll question, a link to make donations to support the site and links to other sections of the site.

At the top of the page are three tabs: one takes you to rate information for advertisers; the next takes you to more photo slideshows; and the third one takes you to a page with links to related websites. The pictures in the slideshows are nice, but there's not a lot of them.

On the left side of the page is a column with the site navigation links. The "Foliage Reports" link is broken down into three sublinks: one for the northeast, one for the southeast and one for the midwest.

Clicking on any one of the sublinks brings you to a list of dated reports. The reports are prepared using information from "foliage spotters" in the local regions. Each report has a description of conditions in the area and color-coded maps for foliage color and leaf-drop status.

There's a link that takes you to archived reports from years past and another one that takes you to maps locating the foliage spotters in each covered state. There's also a link with suggested lodgings in different states, but the pickings are slim with only one or two per state. Finally, there's a link to a section that explains how and why leaves change color, and gives instructions on how to preserve leaves. The site is nicely colored in autumn hues and easy to navigate, but the design could use a little more polish. While it has interesting information about the where, when and why of foliage, there's not a lot of useful information for planning a leaf-watching trip.