

AUTUMN'S LONG LOST AROMA

By Fred Hobbs

Will the impossible occur soon? Will our long string of plus-90 degree high temperatures mellow out to a succession of low 70s and high 60s? Mother Nature has always made it so in this part of the world. And when they finally, mercifully, come, will those moderated temperatures as we head into autumn produce a fine crop of gorgeous fall colors on the trees? May we look forward to seeing the reds, golds, fading light greens, rust colors and even shades in between that don't have official names? Let us hope for a spectacular color display of high country aspens, city maples and assorted bushes and vines.

Not to put a damper on this florid prose in praise of nature's splendors, but every beautiful deciduous leaf eventually turns brown, shrivels and falls to the ground. This process is frequently used as a metaphor for the human life cycle, but that can be left for another discourse at another time.

On a more positive note, the falling leaves offer another opportunity to commune with nature. Oh, sure, raking the dead leaves is a chore, but if kids or grandkids are around, the autumn ritual can be turned into fun. Rake the leaves into a huge pile, run and jump on the pile, maybe have a leaf fight, which, of course, results in having to gather the leaves again. The kids generally try to beg off the next step in the process: bagging the leaves.

And that brings up the opportunity to lament a time not too long ago, when disposing of the leaves in carefully packaged and tied containers for recycling pick up was not deemed necessary. The common practice then was to put the "used" leaves in a wheel barrow or red Radio Flyer wagon, haul them to the alley, stuff them into the ash pit and light 'em up.

The aroma from the smoke created by the burning leaves was delightfully pungent and a fond autumnal memory of many a child. Somewhere along in the 1970s, maybe 80s, the age of the environmental crusades began. Smoke from autumn leaf burning was determined actually to be pollution, contaminating the earth with man-made waste. Local ordinances were passed outlawing the practice.

Now, we should all embrace the notion and the practice of being environmentally conscious. Science has shown that inhaling smoke into your lungs like a three pack a day cigarette fiend can lead to a very early grave. Even second hand smoke can be harmful. While a once a year leaf-filled ash pit fire seems harmless enough, heeding the environmental and health hazards is prudent.

It's a shame, though, that today's children can't experience that wonderful smell as the smoke curled in the crisp autumn air, a bit of a reward for their work in clearing the yard of the fallen leaves.

Why, before this aromatic delight was deemed a no-no, didn't somebody devise a method of replicating the smell, bottle up some of it (in environmentally safe containers) and each fall season put them on the shelves at Wal-Mart beside the lavender, green apple and Irish Spring.