

A Quest for Fall Color in Eastern Washington

Ask any photographer what their favorite time of the year is. The vast majority will say, "Autumn."



**The prize-winner,
Autumn Leaves**

Rich Leon

Rich lives, writes and photographs from Spokane.

In fall, the landscape is transformed into a kaleidoscope of beautiful rustic colors, and the light is also incredibly evocative from dawn to dusk. Changes in the weather create challenging conditions, and opportunities to take stunning photos present themselves at every turn.

I live in Eastern Washington, a tough place to photograph the changing colors of autumn as we have mostly evergreen trees such as ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir. With more needles than leaves, capturing the delight of autumn is certainly more challenging in our area than it is in the Rocky Mountains or in the eastern United States, where they have a wider variety of deciduous trees, including maple, elm and oak.

A few years ago, I went out on a journey of discovery. I knew my quest to find great fall color close to home would be a daunting task at best, but I was up for the challenge.

I have been an avid hiker for many years and have co-authored three local hiking guides, so I knew of several good places to seek out color. After a trip along the Spokane River, I had a couple of good photos, but I knew I could get more if I kept looking. My next stop was Mount Spokane State Park, about 20 miles from my house. I have hiked the many miles of trails here for many years and love it, but the color in the trees just wasn't as good as I was looking for and I was only able to get one really good shot.

After two days out photographing had produced only three good fall color photos, I knew I needed to increase my chances of finding good material. I asked myself, "Where is the best place to find trees outside of a forest?" The answer that came to me was the Spokane Arboretum. With 600 species of trees, I knew my chances of finding something to photograph would be very good.

I arrived at my destination at the perfect time of day, about two hours before sunset. The trees appeared to glow in the early evening light. It didn't take long to find just the right tree to photograph. I took out my trusty Pentax, snapped my

80-320 mm zoom lens into place and worked to find just the right composition.

Looking through the viewfinder, I knew I had a contender, but I couldn't be 100 percent sure until I saw the slides. When my slides came back a few days later, I knew I had taken something special indeed, but I didn't realize how special until I entered the image in our local camera club competition.

That year, the image I captured just a few miles from my house earned the Spokane Camera Club's top honors. My "Autumn Leaves" beat out stiff competition from slides taken from around United States and other parts of the world, proving that you don't have to trek to a distant destination to find good subject matter to photograph. If you look around, you can find great material in your own back yard.

Mount Spokane State Park

Total mileage: 5 miles

Elevation gain: 1,200 feet if you start at Smith's Gap

Highest elevation: 5,282 feet

Managed by: Mount Spokane, Mount Kit Carson

Mount Spokane State Park offers many different trails to hike, horseback ride, or mountain bike. To check out the rest of the trails I would recommend getting a Mount Spokane State Park trail map. Most of the trails give you an opportunity to take some photographs of fall color along with fall mushrooms.

After entering the park, proceed to the second parking area, which will be on your right (make sure you display your Discover Pass). This entry point will take you down the Day Mountain Spokane Road and when you reach Smith's Gap you will have some different choices on where to hike from here. If you go down the road for about 30 yards, you can take a new trail (on your right) that will take you up to Mount Kit Carson.

Down about 100 yards on the road from Smith's Gap, you will find trail 155 on your left that will take you down to Kirk's Lodge.

If you don't like either of those choices, you can go back the way you came by going on the trail 100.

Late September to early October is a great time to explore the many trails in your quest to photograph fall color.



Liberty Lake Trail

Total mileage: 3 miles (to the cedar grove and back)

Elevation gain: None from trailhead to the cedar grove. 2,000 foot gain if you go to the waterfall

Highest elevation: 4,200 feet

Managed by: Spokane County Parks Dept

Map: USGS Liberty Lake and Mica Peak

The Liberty Lake Trailhead is found at the southern end of the Liberty Lake County Park campground. As it initially follows Liberty Creek, the trail is fairly flat, an easy hike for any age and tree-lovers will enjoy the stands of ponderosa pines, Douglas-fir, birch and cottonwood. Soon enough, you will reach an old cedar grove, a wonderful place to stop and have a fall picnic and seek out mushrooms. Last October, I found many chicken mushrooms, along with some rosy russulas and chanterelles. You could see *Amanita muscaria*, one of the most beautiful mushrooms found in the Inland Northwest.

If you decide to follow the trail past the cedar grove, the grades steepens as the trail switchbacks up the hillside toward a forest waterfall.

Learn more about this area at www.spokanecounty.org/parks under "Conservation Futures."



Finch Arboretum

Spokane's Finch Arboretum is a 65-acre park found just minutes southwest of downtown. The site is an extensive botanical and tree garden with more than 2,000 labeled ornamental trees, shrubs, and flowers. Garden Springs Creek runs along it, and several walking paths run through it.

In fall, you'll find that a number of deciduous species produce a color extravaganza. Year-round highlights include a rhododendron glen, an array of conifers and an extensive collection of maple trees.

The Finch Arboretum is found on Woodlawn Boulevard just southwest of town off of Sunset Highway. Admission is free.