While fall is always a time I look forward to, this season has been a little disappointing in the foliage department. The sugar maples in particular have let me down, slowly fading from the saturated green of mid-summer to jaundiced yellow and splotchy browns and maroons. I’ve seen leaf seasons vary considerably over the years, but this autumn may be the least impressive yet, and I found myself curious about what factors go into good—or bad—fall foliage, anyway.

I’ve always assumed that the main factor driving fall colors is temperature, such that a cooler, crisper fall would lead to more striking leaf colors. As it turns out, while temperature is an important variable, its influence is slightly more complicated than common sense would suggest. The main mechanism by which temperature impacts leaf color is a one-two punch driven by warm days and cool nights. During the sun-light day, photosynthesis produces sugars that are subsequently trapped in the constricting veins of the leaf as night falls and temperatures cool. The sunnier the days and cooler the nights, the more pronounced the effect.

However, temperature differentials are not the only force at play. Season length and moisture levels both also play a part. A late spring can suppress fall colors down the road, as can a long Indian summer. Likewise, moist soils through the summer and fall will contribute to brilliant colors… but a drought will diminish them.

Putting these variables together, this year’s underwhelming leaf season makes a fair bit of sense. We’ve had an extremely long, dry summer, and even well into October we have yet to see our first truly chilly fall night. It is no wonder, then, that the foliage over the past few weeks has left something to be desired.

Looking ahead, we may expect more dry summers and warm autumns in our future, but the prognosis for fall foliage is not all bad. In my observation, these same conditions have lent themselves to a drawn-out display from our oaks and hickories, both species that may become more abundant in southern New England as maples and birch diminish in abundance. Fall in the Quiet Corner may look different in the future, but perhaps no less beautiful.

For more information, visit: yalef.es/leaves
The Phoenix Rises at Yale-Myers

Leonora Pepper  MF ’17

It started with two days of chainsaw practice. For most of us, this was an entirely new skill, and we approached it with more than a little trepidation. The saws were big, surprisingly heavy and numbingly loud but the worst part was not knowing how they would behave upon making contact with wood. Taking one in hand felt like volunteering to be the dance partner of an unpredictable tiger.

Luckily we were in the hands of Bill Girard, a seasoned logger and chainsaw trainer who every year teaches the fledgling foresters of the Yale Summer Apprentice Forester Program how to safely and accurately do everything from felling mature trees to doing maintenance to keeping the chainsaws running optimally. During those two days in May, our arms and legs trembled as we concentrated, one by one, on bringing our designated tree down to exactly crush a stake planted beforehand to dictate the direction of fall.

In the aftermath, we found ourselves caked with sawdust, wobbly with adrenaline and wiping sweat from our eyes. Nonetheless, we were exhilarated with the acquisition of this new skill. Our teacher was willing to take as much time as needed for each of us to absorb safety protocol and feel confident in what we were doing. He guided us through the initial moments of uncertainty to a satisfying and productive finish.

In a sense, this became a theme of our summer working at the school forests: moving beyond uncertainty to accomplishment, drawing from our own determination and the guidance of our teachers.

The Saturday before Forest Crew was scheduled to kick into gear in earnest, the Yale-Myers camp burned to the ground. News of the fire spread fast. Before the ashes had settled, classmates and alumni were reaching out in support and in sadness for our school’s razed camp. Later, when we did make the move to our modified summer quarters, many of our first conversations with residents of Union, Ashford, Eastford and the surrounding towns revolved around the shock of seeing the camp gone up in smoke.

Upon hearing the news of the fire, we each spent several stunned hours of uncertainty – how long would it be until Yale-Myers was accessible again? Would the Apprentice program be cancelled altogether?

In remarkable short order, our School Forests Director Dr. Mark Ashton and Managers Shannon Murray and Julius Pasay made clear that we would go full steam ahead despite the enormity of the setbacks. With our start date pushed back by a week, we finally rolled in determined to do what we could to help bring our camp back into operation. In the following weeks, we worked collectively and creatively to make our improvised living spaces as functional and homey as possible. Tent eyes up, makeshift appliances appeared, and the weekly trip to the transfer station became a reason to visit ‘Trash to Treasures’ – the source of many gems with which we merrily decorated our outdoor pavilion-kitchen-meeting space.

For our annual Crew portrait, we found inspiration in the symbol of the phoenix rising from the ashes.

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Over the course of the summer, we worked to maintain our forest roads, mark property boundaries, paint a total of 500,000 board feet of timber for sale, and conduct an ecological inventory across a 1000-acre division of the Yale-Myers forest. In doing so, we were following in the footsteps of many crews before us, and the work we delivered supports the continued operation of our School Forests Program.

During the last two weeks of the summer, the forest crew traveled to New Hampshire and Vermont to put our hard-earned skills to work in Yale’s northerly forests. This was a chance to work more independently, a bit further from the experienced gazes of our supervisors. It was also a tighter timeframe during which we would implement all the stages of forest management we’d learned in the previous months. In spite of the uncertain beginning to the summer, we’d gotten in a full field season and built the skill set we needed to implement sound forest management decisions on new ground.

While we drove north, back at Yale-Myers the finishing touches were being put on the new outdoor classroom – the first completed structure of the post-fire reconstruction.

It will be a while, still, until rebuilding is concluded but it’s well underway. And in the meantime, thanks to the determination of teachers and participants alike, the educational programs running out of our school forests remain strong.

Get a Management Plan for Your Land

Thinking of stepping up your game in your woodlot? Curious to learn about the ecology and history of your woods? Consider working with Yale F&ES forestry students to have a management plan prepared for your property.

Getting a management plan is an opportunity to crystalize your land management and conservation goals, and get free professional-grade advice on ways to achieve them. It is also a chance for Yale F&ES foresters to put their educations into practice.

INTERESTED, OR HAVE QUESTIONS?

Please contact the Yale School Forests Manager, Shannon Murray, at: shannon.murray@yale.edu.
Social Science in the Quiet Corner

Joshua Morse  MESc ’17

The Quiet Corner Initiative and Yale-Myers forest have a history of distinguished service as a living classroom where forestry students put the skills and concepts mastered in class into practice. Drafting management plans, marking timber, and conducting wildlife surveys are staples of the Quiet Corner and Yale-Myers “curriculum”, familiar to forestry students and landowners alike. Perhaps less familiar, but increasingly central to the Quiet Corner Initiative’s teaching mission, is a growing interest in incorporating social science techniques into the range of conservation lessons taught in and around the school forest.

In the spring of 2016, many Quiet Corner landowners received a call or an email from Yale students making a variation on a common request. Typically, an inquiry from students heralds a meet-up for a woods walk to assess timber potential or wildlife habitat on a QCI member’s property. In this case, the proposed woods walks had a very different focus: getting to know the QCI members themselves, and learning about the values that underlie their relationships with the land.

Trying to understand something as complicated as the way that a woodland owner values her property is a daunting task under any circumstances. It becomes even more challenging when interviewer and interviewee have never met, and have limited time. An interviewer — especially one who is just learning the art — might well overlook a key point if they adhere too rigidly to a pre-made set of questions. Or, they might harp too long on an issue unique to a single interviewee if they allow the dialogue to develop completely organically. Fortunately for the students tasked with mapping QCI member conservation values that spring, Yale FES is home to several social scientists who specialize in a method designed to combine the robustness of a survey with the flexibility of an informal chat over drinks, the semi-structured interview.

The “structured” part of a semi-structured interview comes from the interviewer’s commitment to making sure the conversation covers a specific set of topics. This past spring, researchers were interested in why QCI members choose to own land in the first place, how they interact with their properties, and what they hope will become of their land after they have moved on. The “semi” of “semi-structured” references the role that the interviewer’s discretion and the interviewee’s interest plays in determining when in the course of a conversation each set topic should be brought up, and how much attention it should receive. In this case, this flexibility made it possible for student researchers to capture the uniqueness of each individual’s relationship with their land by allowing the interviewee’s interest to dictate where emphasis fell within the discussion.

The results of this spring’s landowner surveys will have consequences near and far. Within the Quiet Corner, student researchers’ finding that many landowners think of their properties as part of a larger landscape that they hope will remain wooded and rural could be the basis for a landscape-scale conservation project in years to come. Further abroad, the qualitative research skills that students honed in this project were put to good use during summer fieldwork as far away as Wyoming’s Wind River Mountains.

As both a practical project with on-the-ground consequences for land management in the Quiet Corner, and a skill-building exercise for Yale students who will range far-afield over the course of their careers, the spring’s landowner interviewees were in keeping with the best Quiet Corner Initiative traditions. And, by expanding on the School Forests’ longstanding role as a laboratory for technical field skills in the natural sciences, the project affirmed Yale School of Forestry’s growing commitment to interdisciplinary work. Most importantly, this project highlights the great contribution that Quiet Corner landowners make to the education of the next generation of environmental leaders in disciplines that run the gamut from forestry to sociology.