



Shades of nature

Why our colour preferences change with the seasons

As the wind freshens and the leaves turn from vibrant greens to coppery browns and golds, you may notice changes in what brings you happiness. Warming spiced soups take the place of salads. A hot cup of chai appeals more than elderflower cordial. Soft fabrics rather than crisp cottons are comforting against your skin, and you opt for a hot bath with soothing scents as opposed to a cool shower. With all of this in mind, it's unsurprising that scientists have discovered colour preferences can also change with the seasons.

Under test

When psychologist Karen Schloss and her colleagues started their research into seasonal colour preference one September, the university campus in Providence, Rhode Island, was lush and green. 'We had participants come in once a week until December, when the leaves had fallen and the trees were bare. Each time they came into the lab, we just asked them to rate how much they liked a set of colours. It took about five minutes, and it was just part of their weekly schedule,' explains Karen, now associate professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

The options included leaf colours such as dark red and orange, alongside non-leaf colours. The participants didn't know about this differentiation or why they were being asked repeatedly about their colour preferences. While recording the responses of the test subjects, the scientists documented

the changing hues of the natural world around them, taking pictures of the trees as the leaves turned and then fell.

At the end of the study, participants were asked to rate how much they liked a selection of items associated with different seasons. This included hay rides and pumpkin-spice lattes for autumn or building a snowman and sipping hot chocolate for winter. 'We wanted to see if our ability to predict changes in preferences for autumn colours was specific to how much participants liked autumn-associated concepts,' says Karen.

The team was fascinated by the findings of the study. Not only did people's preference for autumn colours increase during the autumn as colour vibrancy intensified, but it then dropped off towards December as the dark colours of winter started to dominate. Karen notes: 'At an individual level, a participant's preference for autumn colours was more likely to increase if they had a greater preference for concepts associated with autumn.' The team also documented a gradual increase in preference for the non-leaf colours, but there wasn't the 'inverted U-shaped curve' that they saw with the leaf colours.

Positive experiences

Karen and the team created their study in order to delve deeper into a concept she and colleague Steve Palmer had investigated several years earlier. They wanted to find out where colour preferences come from and discovered that preference is informed by experience.

'The idea is that your preference for a given colour is influenced by how much you like all of the concepts. That is, all objects, entities, events – everything that is associated with that colour,' Karen says. As an example, she explains that a person's preference for an object such as a blue water bottle will be influenced by association. Does it remind them of a clear sky and clean water, or does it make them think of the decor in the dentist's surgery they dreaded visiting as a child?

Preference, it appears, is dictated by the balance of negative and positive associations. Karen and Steve gave this a name – ecological valence theory. Most people who took part in the research showed a tendency against dark yellows, which are colours that might be associated with biological waste or even rotting food.

In tune with nature

So, how does the theory relate to the seasons? Participants associated certain colours with autumn but also with certain positive experiences that made colours more appealing. As the seasons moved on and factors such as the weather and foods changed, their colour preferences changed too.

Perhaps this is hard-wired into the human brain from a time when people's lives were more in tune with the natural world. As the year progressed, certain experiences would have been expected and recognised. Colour changes were part of this and indicated that all was as it should be. For example, it was

accepted that green apples were ready to eat in autumn, but yellowing apples towards winter were rotten.

Although Karen says more research is needed, she explains: 'We think that the mechanism underlying the ecological valence theory of colour preferences is built on the evolutionary advantage of being attracted to outcomes that are positive for us and avoiding outcomes that are negative.'

Staying connected

In the modern world, daily awareness of the natural world is becoming increasingly lost. Fewer people mark an equinox or even notice the leaves changing until the riot of colour is in full swing. A 2025 report commissioned by Nestlé UK and Ireland revealed that a fifth of the UK city residents interviewed hadn't ventured into the countryside for six months or more.

However, changing colour preferences show that awareness of the seasons is still there, even if it has been somewhat dulled by modern lives spent among buildings rather than trees. It's widely accepted that living in tune with the natural world is good for our wellbeing. Actively looking at how colour preferences change seasonally could be a way of regaining this connection with nature. Perhaps it's also simply a chance to think about all of the things that make the heart sing as the year moves from season to season.

Words: Katie Scott

*‘Even if something is left undone,
everyone must take time to sit still
and watch the leaves turn’*

ELIZABETH LAWRENCE



STAYING IN STEP WITH SEASONAL COLOURS

Want simple, low-commitment ways to reflect how the changing seasons make you feel? Interior architectural designer Kate Whitfield, founder of An Artful Life (anartfullife.co.uk), has some ideas for quick and inexpensive changes to your decor

1. Add warmth and texture during winter with rugs, sheepskins and throws. These can be packed away come summer, allowing your space to feel lighter and cooler when the weather warms up.

2. Embrace soft, low-level lighting in the darker months. Candles create a gentle glow that feels inviting when daylight fades early. Table lamps come in such a variety of styles and colours, they're the perfect way to add interest, create focal points or change the vibe of a space.

3. Rotate your artwork by switching up the pieces on your walls – it's even possible to rent pieces of art that align with your current colour palette. This lets you shift the mood seasonally, introducing colours and energy that match how you feel at that time of year.

4. Accessories are the easiest way to add colour and seasonal twists. Cushion covers are simple to swap out and small enough to store, while ceramics or vases can be styled in different palettes

depending on your mood or natural conditions. Switching out your floral or botanical arrangements to reflect the blooms of the season can completely shift the energy of a room.

5. Think about keeping bright and bold colours to one feature wall only, as opposed to throughout an entire room. That way, repainting seasonally isn't such a huge undertaking. Alternatively, try colour-block painting sections, areas or features on a wall.

