University of Nevada
Cooperative Extension

Allergenic plants

While we may complain bitterly about our plants enduring the incredible heat, the terrible soils and the ongoing drought, we in southern Nevada sometimes forget that we too might suffer from the environment.

Sneezing, eyes tearing, skin itching, throat swelling – if you have experienced any of these, you know how miserable it can be to have allergies. For good reason, spring is the time that people think of as the awful allergy season but we should not forget that autumn is also a time when certain plants produce pollen in abundance. These include desert natives such as sagebrush and saltbush.

Some of us moved to the great American Southwest from areas where ample rainfall encouraged abundant pollen formation. Arriving here, we were thrilled to find that many of our familiar allergens were absent. That meant being able to enjoy spring and autumn without the terrible effects that pollen causes. That delightful situation could not last forever; too often, the plants we enjoy in this region will also produce allergenic pollen.

There are quite a few reasons this happens. We humans have been introducing non-native plants into whatever new region where we have moved, and if we are allergic to one group of plants, we are likely to develop allergies to more.


Olive Trees

Mulberry and olive trees are infamous; some of the most allergenic trees we could grow. On the OPAL (Ogren Plant Allergy Level) scale, they rate a 10, the maximum. These two impressive shade trees must not be planted in Clark County; the fruitless olive, *Swan Hill*, is an exception.

Other trees have a high OPAL. Ash is a popular landscape trees, but it produces a great deal of pollen, which quite a few people find problematic. Internet references state that cottonwood pollen is allergenic, but that mistake grew from belief that the “cotton” is the pollen. Not true, the “cotton” is the plant’s seed, which appears around the same time in spring as the highly allergenic pollen of mulberries, olives, and a large number of grasses.

Coming to the end of the summer, we might imagine making big landscape changes. If there is a concern about allergies, however, select plants that are less likely to cause problems. The range of possible landscape plants is large; it would be impossible to memorize such a list. There are a couple of rules of thumb to ease selection.

When it comes to allergies, look at the flowers. A wind-pollinated plant need not produce an attractive flower; here, the important thing is for the pollen to be caught on a breeze and delivered to a female. In general, these are likely to promote more allergies than a plant with a lovely flower. A flower that we would find attractive is likely to require a pollinator animal, which could be an insect, bird, or a bat. The pollen, carried on the insect or bird, would not pose a major allergy problem.

Preventing plant stress may also lower pollen levels. A plant grown with insufficient light, water or nutrition may produce more than one that is living in comfort.

Dr. Angela O'Callaghan is the Social Horticulture Specialist for University of Nevada Cooperative Extension. Contact ocallaghana@unce.unr.edu or 702-257-5581.