

- E** It has also been proposed that trees may produce vivid red colours to convince herbivorous insects that they are healthy and robust and would be easily able to mount chemical defences against infestation. If insects paid attention to such advertisements, they might be prompted to lay their eggs on a duller, and presumably less resistant host. The flaw in this theory lies in the lack of proof to support it. No one has as yet ascertained whether more robust trees sport the brightest leaves, or whether insects make choices according to colour intensity.
- F** Perhaps the most plausible suggestion as to why leaves would go to the trouble of making anthocyanins when they're busy packing up for the winter is the theory known as the 'light screen' hypothesis. It sounds paradoxical, because the idea behind this hypothesis is that the red pigment is made in autumn leaves to protect chlorophyll, the light-absorbing chemical, from *too much light*. Why does chlorophyll need protection when it is the natural world's supreme light absorber? Why protect chlorophyll at a time when the tree is breaking it down to salvage as much of it as possible?
- G** Chlorophyll, although exquisitely evolved to capture the energy of sunlight, can sometimes be overwhelmed by it, especially in situations of drought, low temperatures, or nutrient deficiency. Moreover, the problem of oversensitivity to light is even more acute in the fall, when the leaf is busy preparing for winter by dismantling its internal machinery. The energy absorbed by the chlorophyll molecules of the unstable autumn leaf is not immediately channelled into useful products and processes, as it would be in an intact summer leaf. The weakened fall leaf then becomes vulnerable to the highly destructive effects of the oxygen created by the excited chlorophyll molecules.
- H** Even if you had never suspected that this is what was going on when leaves turn red, there are clues out there. One is straightforward: on many trees, the leaves that are the reddest are those on the side of the tree which gets most sun. Not only that, but the red is brighter on the upper side of the leaf. It has also been recognised for decades that the best conditions for intense red colours are dry, sunny days and cool nights, conditions that nicely match those that make leaves susceptible to excess light. And finally, trees such as maples usually get much redder the more north you travel in the northern hemisphere. It's colder there, they're more stressed, their chlorophyll is more sensitive and it needs more sunblock.
- I** What is still not fully understood, however, is why some trees resort to producing red pigments while others don't bother, and simply reveal their orange or yellow hues. Do these trees have other means at their disposal to prevent overexposure to light in autumn? Their story, though not as spectacular to the eye, will surely turn out to be as subtle and as complex.