

Allergy levels are high, but pine pollen is not to blame

By T. Lee Brown
Correspondent

A fine mist of dust, electric-yellow, descends upon Sisters Country this time of year. It lands on decks, cars, and roads. It shudders onto the forest floor and sifts into people's hair.

It's ponderosa pine pollen, the trees' way of saying, "Hey, baby, let's make saplings together." The pollen bursts from the prominent male pollen cones to be seen on branch tips this time of year.

It's dispersed at random by the wind. Each grain contains air sacs to help it remain airborne. If it makes its way to a female cone, it can fertilize an egg.

A look at pollen.com's National Allergy Map this week showed most of the United States at low to medium allergy levels, illustrated in pleasant shades of green, yellow, and light orange.

One menacing red blob stood out: a high allergy alert oozing from the central Oregon Coast through the Willamette Valley — and all the way to Central Oregon.

In the 97759 ZIP code,

the forecast called for more days of red-zone high allergen counts coming up. Some pollens may be local. Others blow in on the wind.

The main culprits? Grasses, oak, and walnut. Pine wasn't even mentioned.

In fact, here's a shocker: "Allergenicity: No allergy has been reported for Ponderosa Pine (*Pinus ponderosa*) species." That's the news from PollenLibrary.com, a storehouse of information provided by IMS Health, the company that develops the allergy forecasts on pollen.com and manufacturers a tool for measuring pollen count.

So why do so many people think they're allergic to ponderosa pollen? It can cause some simple irritation, just like any powder a person might inhale. Mainly, though, it grabs our attention because it's plentiful and colorful.

Its spores, or grains, are much larger than most other local pollens. We see it in drifts, and we assume it's setting off our sneezing and itching.

Many allergy experts believe that the spore's large size actually prevents it from causing allergic reactions.

Allergy and asthma specialist Dr. Adam Williams of Bend Memorial Clinic explained, "Smaller spores are more likely to be inhaled deeper, and are more likely to come in contact with the immune system."

Juniper and grasses are common causes of Central Oregon hay fever this time of year. Airborne molds cause allergies, too.

Housing developers, gardeners, and landscapers contribute to the seasonal allergy load by planting non-native trees and shrubs. These plantings can make a patch of rugged high desert look oddly similar to a suburb in Ohio or a neighborhood in Portland.

Those who wish to re-create the Midwest or Willamette Valley here should take warning: these plantings can slurp large amounts of water, which is becoming a more scarce resource in the region. Various species also release allergenic pollens that drift in the air for miles and miles.

Many folks move to desert climates for health reasons—respiratory and allergy included. The introduction of certain street trees and ornamentals can make a place uninhabitable for them.

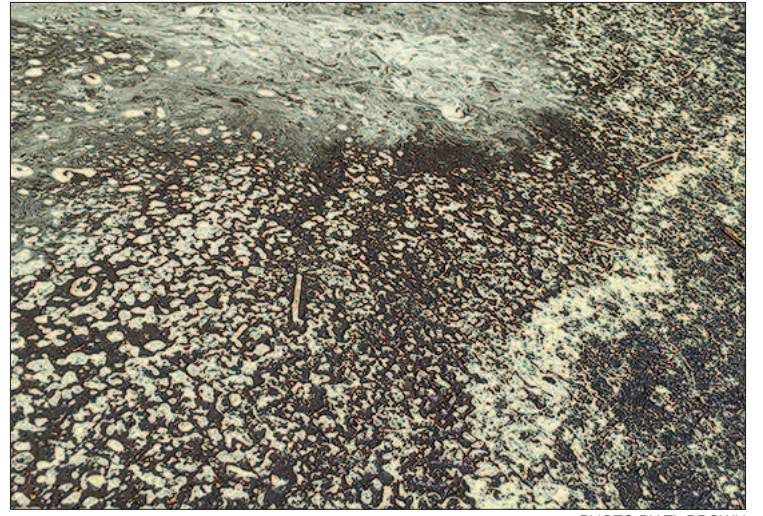


PHOTO BY TL BROWN

Ponderosa pine pollen swirls around the asphalt following a thunderstorm.

Arizona provides a sad example. The state attracts people looking for healthy air and a warm place to retire. Olive trees, however, were imported in the 1930s. These became hugely popular before people realized that their pollen stirs up serious allergies in a large percentage of the population.

In cities like Phoenix and Tucson, nurseries and landscape companies were no longer allowed to sell or plant olives as of the 1960s. They worked around the rules by planting species and cultivars that supposedly produced less pollen; allergywise.com

describes how this ruse did not work out. Olive trees are still "one of Arizona's most notorious contributors to our seasonal allergy misery."

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