Color Theory  Last fall in New England was warm and dry. Foliage fans swore the autumn palette was drab. Their conclusion: Climate change is killing fall color.

Scientists aren’t so sure. Comparing intensity of color from one year to the next “is very difficult,” says ecologist John O’Keefe of Harvard Forest in Massachusetts. Even what drives color change is up for debate. “We have new ideas, but much is still a mystery,” says botanist David Lee of the National Tropical Botanical Garden.

Now researchers are studying how climate change affects color from year to year. They’re tracking the onset of autumn hues and training webcams on trees to gauge intensity. All they know now is warmer temperatures have delayed the fall show a few days—so far.

The forecast for this year is anyone’s guess. One thing’s certain: Weather always plays a big role. Drought can cause leaves to turn brown and drop off early; cloudy days can slow the creation of red pigment. As for the long run, a balmier Northeast would be bad for cold-loving, colorful sugar maples: Old trees would hang on, but seedlings and saplings wouldn’t thrive. So don’t delay that Vermont foliage tour until 2058. —Marc Silver