

Why Is Autumn the Only Season With Two Names?



How did autumn—or perhaps I should say fall—become the only season with two names?

While the modern names of winter and summer have been around for more than 1,000 years, the names of fall and spring are more recent. This is partly because the two seasons were long viewed as secondary to summer and winter. As late as the 18th century, English speakers were less likely to think of the year as having four seasons, focusing instead on the coldest and warmest portions of the year.

Spring and fall likely gained popularity in conjunction with each other. They each initially appeared in the 16th century as spring of the leaf and fall of the leaf, respectively. The two complemented each other nicely and were soon shortened to the more succinct fall and spring, with the longer phrases disappearing over the next few hundred years.

It's a bit of a mystery why the superfluous autumn persists, but it may have something to do with the Atlantic Ocean. The rise of autumn and the appearance of fall happened around the same time as the British arrival on the American continent, and it's there that the latter really caught on. In fact one of the Oxford English Dictionary's first citations of fall comes from Sir Walter Raleigh, one of the first English explorers of North America: In his poem "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd," he uses the word to contrast with spring. Fall hasn't ever had quite as much currency in the United Kingdom as it has stateside—even though some Brits concede that North Americans have the superior term. In *The King's English*, the Fowler brothers counseled against Americanisms, but expressed envy over fall: Fall is better on the merits than autumn, in every way. However, in the end the Fowlers warned that it was too late. "We once had as good a right to it as the Americans," they wrote, "but we have chosen to let the right lapse, and to use the word now is no better than larceny."



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