FOR THE LOVE OF LEAVES DON'T BEGRUDGE HERITAGE CORRIDOR A LITTLE GREEN:

`Splendor In The Grass." That line, borrowed from the English romantic poet William Wordsworth, was the title of an Oscar-winning 1961 film by Elia Kazan about passionate young love in summertime Kansas.

"Splendor In The Leaves." Were I a writer of romance novels (which is pretty hard for a Norwegian male over 50), that's the title I would choose for a book about the more mature love between New Englanders and their October leaves.

Before you swoon too much at the mere thought of such delight, you should know that the Republican Study Committee report of Sept. 22 proposes to take some of the splendor out of our leaves. After careful analysis of the federal budget, the group of 100 conservatives in the House of Representatives is proposing to do away with funds for National Heritage Areas. The program funds the nonprofit Quinebaug-Shetucket Heritage Corridor of eastern Connecticut and south-central Massachusetts, a coalition of 35 towns supporting sane development in a place of wooded rural villages and trout stream tributaries.

Walking Weekends, the signature program of the Quinebaug-Shetucket Heritage Corridor, is a leaf peeper's dream come true. Most of this year's 93 free guided walks combine the enjoyment of nature, hands-on history and public health at the same time. During my recent walk, for example, I guided nearly 70 souls along leafy trails while exploring stone walls at a Connecticut Audubon sanctuary in Hampton.

Note that Walking Weekends is plural. One weekend's walk to an old house, mill, rock, graveyard or farm used to meet the demand. But after more than a dozen years, the Quinebaug-Shetucket Heritage Corridor decided to bracket Columbus Day with two full weekends of hikes. The wet one has already passed. The schedule for the coming dry one (we hope) is posted at www.thelastgreenvalley.org/ww.html.

De-funding the heritage corridor, of course, will not take away the leaves. But it will take away the region's best incentive to celebrate them. One can choose from a rotating menu of splendiferous leaves: There's dry-crisp, moist-soft, those hanging limp on twigs and those fluttering to the ground. My favorite main course is always the sugar maple. My favorite dessert is always the custard color of paper birch leaves.

What's your favorite aperitif? Red sumac? No such choices are available on the prairie menu at this time of year, where the colors of autumn are skinny brown blades of grass leaning sideways.

I'll take the Neapolitan colors of New England's leaves any day. And they're just the icing on the cake during this otherwise exciting season. For starters, it's my birthday month. Then there's the daily excitement of whether the air will be blue-sky Canadian or maritime drizzle from a tropical storm. Storm windows go up as screens come down. There's Rosh Hashana, Ramadan and the run-up to Halloween. There's the culmination of baseball in either quiet anguish or joyful rioting. What a great time to get out and walk yourself giddy, learn something new and improve your health, simultaneously.

On nighttime satellite photos, the Quinebaug-Shetucket Heritage Corridor is the only dark spot near the coast within the megalopolis between metropolitan Boston (which extends to Brunswick, Maine) and metropolitan Philadelphia (which extends to the Appalachians). The dark spot extends from the western fringe of Rhode Island's Narragansett Bay to the eastern fringe of the suburbs between New
Haven and Springfield. The heritage corridor is dark at night because it's mostly undeveloped woodland. We call it the Last Green Valley, a geographic refuge from urban angst and noise pollution. It may not be as lush or exotic as some environments advertised in your favorite travel magazine. But at least it's one you can visit on weekends, or live in if you're lucky enough.

A relatively trivial investment of federal dollars to keep things nice in the Last Green Valley is a whole lot smarter than a massive infusion of taxpayer dollars to mop up after things go bad, whether at home or abroad, whether due to disaster or to chronic urban decay.

Let's not pull the last federal greenback from the Last Green Valley.