The Night Sky
Shine On Harvest Moon

The month of September sees the end of the summer season and the beginning of autumn. At 4:44 p.m. EDT on September 22nd, the sun will leave the northern sky crossing the celestial equator into the southern sky. This marks the beginning of autumn in the northern hemisphere and the beginning of spring in the southern hemisphere. The Harvest Moon – the full moon closest to the autumnal equinox – occurs in the morning of September 19th at 7:13 a.m. EDT. This full moon gets this name since crops can be harvested late into the evenings under its light this time of year.

At dusk Venus shines brightly low in the west-southwest all September, experiencing conjunctions (close approaches of two objects on the sky) with the bright star Spica on September 5th and 6th, a slender crescent moon on September 8th, and with Saturn on the evenings of September 17th and 18th. Saturn sinks lower and lower in the western sky in the evenings as the month progresses, setting 2½ hours after the sun on September 1st and only 1½ hours after the sun by the end of the month. In addition, if you have an unobstructed western horizon, you might be able to catch planet Mercury just above Spica and the western horizon 30 minutes after sunset on September 24th. Unfortunately, this evening apparition of Mercury will not be easy to view since this planet will not get very high in the sky.

Jupiter rises shortly after midnight at the beginning of the month, shining brightly in the constellation of Gemini. Much dimmer Mars rises around 3 a.m. throughout the month of September. Mars shows very rapid motion on the sky, as compared to the other planets, moving from the constellation of Cancer into Leo. For those of you who are early risers, note the position of Mars with respect to the background stars each time you view it and note how its position on the sky changes daily. On the morning of September 8th and 9th, Mars will move across the star cluster M44, the Beehive Cluster. It will make a very pretty site through binoculars. For those of you with telescopes, watch Mars in the Beehive Cluster for a few hours each of these mornings and you notice this planet’s motion across this star cluster.

The first of this season’s free public astronomy open houses at the ETSU Powell Observatory will occur on Saturday, September 14th from 8 to 10 p.m. At these open houses, the public can view objects in the sky through telescopes and hear talks by faculty of the Physics and Astronomy Department. Note that the open houses are cancelled if the sky is cloudy. Further information about these open houses and directions to the observatory can be found on the web at http://www.etsu.edu/cas/physics/observatory/default.aspx.

This month’s Night Sky was written by Dr. Donald G. Luttermoser, Chair of the Department of Physics and Astronomy. He can be reached at lutter@mail.etsu.edu. Astronomy-related information for the public, including a link to the ETSU Powell Observatory, can be found at http://www.etsu.edu/cas/physics/outreach/astronomy.aspx.