

How to catch Tuesday's 'pink moon,' the biggest supermoon of 2020

Our natural satellite is going to do its best to get your attention.

It could be the biggest object in the night sky all year, and all you have to do to see it is step outside after sunset.

The moon will at least appear to be larger than normal Tuesday evening into the early morning hours of Wednesday. That's when the celestial phenomenon colloquially known as a supermoon will return -- and this one should be the biggest and brightest of 2020. Because it's the first full moon of the northern spring, it's also traditionally known as the "pink moon."

Unfortunately, the name has nothing to do with the color of the moon itself, rather it comes from phlox subulata, a pink flower that blooms in spring in the east of North America, according to the Farmer's Almanac.

A quick supermoon refresher: What we call a supermoon is actually the moon at perigee-syzygy, which is a funky rhyme that really just means the moon is near its closest point to us in its slightly elliptical path around Earth.

On Tuesday, the moon will be at its closest point to us all year, making it appear up to 30% larger than it looks when it's at its furthest point from our planet. But it still probably won't be pink. If it's especially hazy where you are, you might get a nice orange hue, but that could be a sign of wildfire smoke nearby and no one wants that, especially during a global pandemic.

To get the best view of the supermoon, head outside around sunset wherever you are on Tuesday to say goodnight to your friendly neighborhood star and then turn around to await the emergence of the full moon over the horizon. Full moons always rise around sunset as a matter of geometry, and thanks to an optical illusion, they also appear at their biggest when they are nearest the horizon.

As always, be sure to share your best photos of the supermoon with me on Twitter @ericcmack.

If you miss it, or the weather doesn't cooperate for you, the Virtual Telescope Project is also planning to livestream its own observations from Rome, as is the Lowell Observatory in Arizona (that feed is embedded at the top of this story). Failing that, you don't have to wait too long for the next supermoon on May 7.

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