

Callery Pear: Street Side Dream Becomes Natural Area Nightmare

Callery pear, commonly known as Bradford pear, is a ubiquitous landscaping tree in Indiana cities and towns. This Asian native was brought to the United States in 1917 as part of a research project to make pear fruit trees more resistant to fire blight. By the 1950s, it was being promoted as an exciting new ornamental.

Bradford pear, the first widely planted Callery pear cultivar, initially seemed like a landscaping dream plant. The tree has abundant white flowers in the spring. Its leaves turn red/purple in the fall. It grows fast, can handle a variety of soil types, and has a nice shape. To top it off, the cultivar was sterile.



Callery pears are commonly used landscaping trees.
Leslie J. Mehrhoff, University of Connecticut, Bugwood.org



Callery pears are now invading natural areas and causing problems.
James H. Miller, USDA Forest Service, Bugwood.org

Over time its less attractive characteristics were identified. Bradford pears are structurally weak. Strong winds, snow and ice result in the tree splitting. In addition, the odor of the flowers resembles that of rotting fish.

New cultivars were developed that were stronger and less likely to split, which was the beginning of the nightmare. Callery pear cultivars are self-sterile; however, when there are multiple cultivars in the same area, they can cross pollinate, resulting in fruit with viable seeds. Birds eat the plentiful fruit and deposit the seeds in new locations. These new hybrid trees spread quickly by seed and sprouting. In the wild, they form dense thickets. Because Callery pear leafs out earlier than many native trees, it shades out native wildflowers and other tree seedlings.

You can help the environment by not planting any Callery pear cultivar and removing existing Callery pear cultivar trees. Instead, plant a native tree such as redbud, serviceberry, American plum, hawthorn, or flowering dogwood.

If you have Callery pear popping up in your fields and forest edges, treat them. Larger trees can be girdled (i.e., cutting bark all around the trunk) or you can cut completely down and treat the stump with an herbicide containing glyphosate and triclopyr. Scattered seedlings can be hand-pulled if the soil is moist. For denser stands, spray the foliage with a glyphosate or triclopyr in mid-late summer. Multiple years of treatment will be required due to Callery pear cultivars' seed bank and re-sprouting ability.