

## Why Do Those Decorative Pears Have Fruit?

### AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

This is the story of a decorative little tree that went bad. The tree is specifically the Callery pear, but most folks know them as Bradford pears. The Callery pear is native to Korea and China. It came to the United States in the very early 1900s and was originally brought in as breeding stock to use in pear breeding, hopefully to breed fireblight resistance into fruiting pears. That didn't work out very well, but eventually homeowners and nurseryman realized that it was a very attractive ornamental and it started to be used more and more often in landscaping.

Its use really took off in the 1970s when a cultivar called Bradford pear was really promoted, and by the 1980s it was showing up everywhere. As one person described it, in the spring it can look like a giant Q-tip in your yard. In a good spring it can be totally covered with masses of white blossoms. A very striking plant to be sure. In the beginning Bradford pears were loved for the white blossoms, purplish red fall leaf color and because it didn't bear fruit.

But there was a downside to the Bradford pear. It tended to develop a lot of branches that arose from the main trunk with very narrow crotch angles. If not pruned out early on, narrow crotch angles become a defect as they are very weak and as the tree grows, the limbs become more and more subject to wind or ice damage. It started to become quite common after a wind storm or ice storm to see a 20 or 30 year old Bradford pear with several branches split out and lying on the ground.

There were many other cultivars of Callery pears out there and once this fatal flaw showed up, nurserymen and plant breeders went to work. Many new cultivars of Callery pears that had better form and structure and thereby stronger and less susceptible to wind damage were identified and developed for the trade. New cultivars came out with name like Aristocrat, Capital, Chanticleer, Cleveland Select, Princess and Stonehill to mention a few. That was about the time that new troubles started to develop!

Pear trees, both ornament Callery pears as well as common fruiting pears, are somewhat self-sterile. We've long known that you'll get a much better fruit crop if you have two pears of different cultivars. Common pears and Callery pears also appear to be only moderately cross fertile and we really never had very many fruit pear trees around here anyway. So very rarely did we ever find fruit on the ornamental pears. But once these other Callery pear cultivars started showing up, things begin to change. There was enough genetic differences between the different cultivars that cross-pollination (thank you honeybees) started taking off and suddenly fruit was abundant on and under these trees in the fall.

A late frost can still really drop the fruit production, but the last few years that hasn't been happening. There are certain pesticides that may reduce fruiting if applied at the right concentration at the right time, early on after blooming. But it looks like we are pretty much stuck with fruit on these trees. Ironically, they are now starting to spring up as volunteer trees everywhere and that could be a problem too!

I am now discouraging further planting of any Callery pear. We have many flowering crabapples that should be considered instead. If you are planting a Callery pear, keep it well away from sidewalks and driveways so you don't have to worry about the fruit. I'm not saying to cut down any trees, just don't plant any more. And that then is my story of the pretty little tree that went bad!