

## What Are Those Pretty White Flowering Trees?

### AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Over the past couple of weeks I have received many phone calls, emails, and questions on the street from people wanting to know what those brilliant white flowering trees are that they are seeing around town and even out across the countryside. These are ornamental pears, often called Bradford Pears, but given the number of different cultivars now available probably best if we just call them Callery Pears. While they are quite striking, especially in years like this, I would like people to stop planting them. The reason is simple, they are becoming an invasive weed.

Callery Pears are native to Korea and China. They were introduced to North America in the early 1900's in an effort to try to breed fire blight resistance into fruiting pears. That effort didn't work so well but they soon became popular as ornamental trees. The Bradford Pear was raised from seed that was imported in 1918. The cultivar was slow to catch on until the 1970s and early 1980s when it was suddenly being planted everywhere. It's pyramidal form, early and abundant white blossoms and medium size made it very popular. Pears are normally self sterile. They need another pear that is not closely related nearby to cross pollinate it. We regularly run into this problem with fruiting pears.

Since everyone was originally planting Bradford Pears and only Bradford Pears, which were essentially identical clones to each other, the trees were fruitless. There would be a mass of white in spring, the blossoms would fade and fall as the glossy deep green leaves came out and in fall the leaves would turn a deep reddish purple. But we soon discovered that Bradford Pears had some issues. Specifically, they tended to grow very upright with very narrow angles of limb attachment, what we call narrow crotch angles, that developed into a weak point. As these trees reach maturity at 20 or so years of age, a big wind storm, or an ice storm, would cause large limbs, sometimes half of the entire tree, to break out. Which signals the beginning of the end for that specific tree.

So researchers started looking for new Callery Pear cultivars that had better branch attachment. They were successful in finding many new cultivars which were released into the horticultural trade. Here's where this story takes an ugly turn. Through all of this selection, the new cultivars are genetically different enough that they can pollinate Bradford cultivars and Bradford can pollinate the new cultivars. Trees that were fruitless for 30 years all of a sudden started bearing fruit, usually a lot of fruit. Unfortunately the fruit is a small rounded fruit with no value for human consumption, but very attractive to birds. Some of the fruit falls on the ground, or driveway or sidewalks, and the other fruit is eaten by the birds with the seeds passing right through the bird. Unlike the small seed of edible pears or even apples, these larger seeds seem to have no problem sprouting and growing. Fence lines, and other areas where birds congregate, are starting to become saturated with little pear seedlings. They really are becoming an invasive weed problem.

We have many wonderful flowering trees that should be considered instead of Callery Pears. There are dozens of flowering crabapples available. If you want one with fruit for the birds, we have excellent choices. Do you want one that doesn't have fruit at all? We have choices for that as well. There are many other spring flowering trees as well.

I can understand why homeowners want to plant an ornamental pear. But once again, in true American fashion, we over did it with them. It's time to diversify and find some other options!