For Release November 8, 2020

**Replace the Pears - Please!**

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

In 1919, seed of *Pyrus calleryana* was purchased in Nanjing, China and brought to the United States. Fireblight, a bacterial disease that can cause severe losses in apples and especially pears, was a serious problem and it was hoped that crosses between this species and the common fruit pear would result in improved resistance to fireblight. Unfortunately that did not work out. But over time as the trees grown from those seeds were allowed to continue growing plantsmen noticed that many of them were quite attractive as ornamental landscape trees. In 1963 one particularly good looking specimen was named Bradford pear and cuttings were rooted to start being released in the landscaping trade.

It didn't take long for people to decide that they wanted one of those nice conical shaped trees with the stunning early spring white flowers in their yard. In fact it wasn't uncommon in the late 1970s to find Bradford pears lining every street in new developments in suburbia. They were stunning when they bloomed and then the flowers dropped off and that was that. Pears are notoriously self sterile, needing a significantly different, genetically, cultivar to cross pollinate them. As all of these Bardford pears were cuttings of that one original tree they were all genetically identical and would not set fruit.

By the late 1980s it became apparent that the Bradford pear had an Achilles heel. Once it reached mature size, simply because of the way that it grow, wind and ice storms would start busting limbs out and that would be the end of that tree. Researchers went back to some of those original callery pears and started making selections that had improved structure that would hold together better. They found numerous cultivars with stronger, better structure that were then named and released to the industry. Unfortunately, since these were callery pears but not Bradford pears, they were just genetically different enough, that we started to see cross pollination which resulted in fruit being set.

This fruit was not large fruit, like common pears have, but little ½ inch size fruit with one seed in the middle. No good for humans but the birds loved them. It was no surprise that as more and more of the improved callery pears were planted, the numbers of trees setting fruit increased and the amount of fruit they produced increased immensely. Sidewalks and driveways that were previously only littered with white petals in the spring were now also covered in the fall with hard little fruits that turned to slippery mush. An inconvenience to be sure. The bigger issue, however, was that the birds ate these and passed the seeds on through their digestive system and planted them everywhere they lifted their tail. Volunteer pear trees are now showing up in many areas and becoming a real invasive problem. To make matters worse, these volunteer pears are often nicely outfitted with really annoying thorns!

It's time to not just stop planting them, but to start cutting them down and replacing them. We have two in the front of the Extension Office that we planted in 1988. I've asked that they be cut down this winter so we can replace them. We have many flowering crabapple cultivars with different shapes, flower colors and even with and without fruit. We have a very good bulletin that describes these and gives disease resistance rating (get one with scab and rust resistance) as well as flower color, tree shape and size and fruit color and retention. The ornamental pears had a good run, but now they are an alien invasive problem. Let's start cutting them down and replacing them to save our natural areas from a pear invasion.

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