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Ornamental Pears Need to Go. Now!

AGRI-VIEWS
by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

In early 1988 the Extension Office moved to it's current location at 119 East 9th Street. That spring we had a little landscaping done and had two ornamental pears planted on either side of the sidewalk coming up to the office from the street. The original ornamental pears were called Bradford Pears (a selection of callery pear) but these were the fairly new cultivar Capital Pear which had improved form and structure. A few weeks ago we had these trees removed and I would encourage anyone who has planted ornamental pears over the past 50 years to do the same!

When the original Bradford Pear was released it quickly became a popular tree. It was often the first tree to bloom in spring and the trees were literally covered in bright white flowers. When it finished blooming, the petals fell off and the rest of the year it was a nice pyramidal formed tree with glossy green leaves that turned a deep purplish red in the late fall. The tree did not produce fruit for a very simple reason. Most pears are self sterile. They need to be pollinated by a pear that was genetically different. Since all of these Bradford Pears were literally clones of the original tree, they couldn't pollinate each other. Edible pears were genetically different, but enough different, a separate species actually, that they wouldn't pollinate the Bradfords.

Unfortunately, the original Bradford Pear had some structural issues that caused them to have weak branch attachment especially as they became mature trees. Wind and ice storms would bust them to pieces. So horticulturalists went back to the original callery pear introductions and looked for trees that were similar but with stronger structure. This resulted in a plethora of new ornamental pears. Still the same brilliant white flowers but a better structure. The downside of these releases was that they were just genetically different enough that they could now all crosspollinate other ornamental pears of different cultivars. As these new cultivars started to be planted widely, we suddenly had once fruitless ornamental pears, bearing an abundance of tiny little hard fruit.

While the fruit was too small and hard to be of any use from a human food point of view, many bird species found them quite edible, especially after they gone through several rounds of freezing weather. As fall moved along the ground (and sidewalk and driveways) under these trees would be littered with these little fruits and the birds would descend on them in droves. They'd gobble down the fruit, digest the pulp off the outside and pass the single seed right on through their system and deposit those seeds where ever they landed and lifted their tails.

Sadly, these seeds are well adapted to sprouting and growing in our climate. The resulting pear trees, while similar to their parents, are highly undesirable as they will form dense thickets and these trees often have short sharp thorn like branches that cause a very unpleasant encounter if you get too close. I can show you places in and around Junction City that are a solid white flowering thicket come spring. Quite honestly, they have become an invasive weed that crowds out our native trees. The further east you go in the country, the worse the problem has become. So I'm leading by example and had our pear trees removed. I'll get a maple and an oak replanted this spring. I'd encourage homeowners to follow suit and also have their pear trees removed. Then replace them with something that is native. For a flowering tree let's use a flowering crabapple. We rarely have them reseed from the fruit. Or for other native trees, give me a call for suggestions. But first we have to quit making the problem worse and start removing those nasty ornamental pears!

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