

White Blooming Trees are Dreaded Bradford Pear Offspring

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I've been getting a lot of calls this spring, asking me to identify the beautiful white-blooming trees seen along roadsides and woodlots throughout southern Indiana. Alas, this is a case of beauty being only skin-deep, because these are not desirable trees. They are the offspring of the detestable Bradford pear, and they are causing environmental problems with their abundance.

My dislike of ornamental (Callery) pears is no secret. These trees, while admittedly quite pretty for one week in the spring, are fairly boring the rest of the year. They have weak branch structures, especially the original Bradford pear, and are often split in half during storms. They are over-planted, and bring about a sense of monotony as they appear in every new cookie-cutter subdivision. Some people find the scent of their blooms offensive. And their fruit are messy, either rotting beneath the tree or, worse yet, passing through birds and onto our cars.

The fruiting habits of the pears are the biggest problem. The original Bradford was advertised as being fruitless, and for the most part, it was. However, when we started bringing in other cultivars of Callery pear in the 1980s to provide the pear-loving public with a stronger tree, we created a new nightmare. Just like an apple tree needs a second variety of apple to cross-pollinate with in order to produce fruit, these new varieties of pear crossed with the over-used Bradford, and the trees were now filled with berry-sized pears.

Birds eat these fruit, and deposit the seeds all over. These reseeded Callery pears form dense, thorny thickets that push out native plants that can't tolerate the deep shade or compete with them for water, soil and space. A single tree can spread rapidly by seed forming a sizeable patch within several years.

Why the abundance of blooms this year? Mostly, due to the difference in winter weather over the last two years. During the winter of 2015, we had a polar vortex which killed some blooms; we also had a cold, wet spring with several freezes, which also prevented a lot of blooming. No flowers means no fruit, and so the trees had a lot of extra carbohydrates to use for producing bountiful numbers of flower buds last fall. This past winter was very mild (actually, the National Weather Service called it the warmest winter since they began keeping records), so all the flower buds survived.

If the bees do their jobs, I expect we'll see bushels of fruit from the ornamental pears this summer, which may lead to more wild pears being seeded come fall. My advice would be to start buying carwash coupons now.

For more information on invasive species, contact the Purdue Extension Service at (812) 435-5287.