

## Callery Pears - A Tree that Really Stinks

By Amelia Harris, Arborist & Wetland Ecologist

After a long cold winter, the first blossoms of springtime are welcome sight. This time of year, along nearly any street in any city in America you can see the happy spray of white blossoms displayed on a perfectly symmetrical, oval-shaped tree. These trees have become a ubiquitous sight in urban neighborhoods and suburban developments. They are Callery pear (*Pyrus calleryana*) trees.

Callery pears are a series of cultivars (plants that have been bred for specific horticultural traits) that originated in Asia. The first Callery pears were brought over during the early 1900s in an effort to breed resistance to fire blight (*Erwinia amylovora*), a bacterial pathogen that was decimating common pears (*Pyrus communis*) and the pear fruit industry at the time. In the 1950s, a particular tree was recognized for its ornamental properties. Grafted clones of this tree were planted in a residential subdivision to test as an ornamental street tree. The cultivar became known as the Bradford pear, which continues to be propagated and sold today. The Bradford pear became prized as a rapidly growing tree with dense, white flowers that bloom early in the spring, a compact and symmetrical growth form, and attractive dark glossy leaves. Throughout the decades since, many other pear cultivars have been bred across the country to capitalize on these popular traits.



For a while, they were seen as desirable trees despite the often off-putting scent of the flowers that many liken to rotting fish. Callery pears were promoted by urban arborists in an effort to beautify neighborhoods and urban areas. In my hometown, the power company would give you one if they had to cut down a tree on your property. However, within 20-30 years, after the trees had reached maturity, people realized this practice was not a good idea.

First, the trees grew larger than expected and power companies had to remove them from powerline rights-of-way. Second, a major structural flaw was revealed. The branching pattern that created the uniform, lollipop-shaped trees also resulted in weak branch attachments that would split under their own weight after about 15-20 years of growth. Trees that were planted near houses, driveways, and parking lots were dropping limbs and causing property damage to homes and vehicles. Even as nurseries cultivated more varieties of Callery pears with stronger branch attachments, another, more sinister, problem emerged.

The Callery pear is unable to self-pollinate, meaning individuals within a particular cultivar cannot produce viable seed. However, different cultivars are capable of cross-

pollinating, producing viable seed that is then spread by birds and mammals who eat the fruits. As more cultivars are introduced and the flowers cross-pollinate, viable seeds are becoming more common and are spreading more prolifically than ever. Additionally, the trees can spread vegetatively and can form dense thickets within just a few years that crowd out native species. Seedlings spread rapidly in disturbed areas and are making inroads into mature forests and even wetlands.

Cities and states are finally taking note of this aggressively invasive species. The tree is classified as an “invasive plant” or “noxious weed” in many states throughout the U.S. Ohio has banned the sale or transfer of Callery pear trees beginning in 2023. Other states, including Indiana, are considering similar measures. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania has banned planting it throughout the metropolitan area and the City of Fayetteville, Arkansas offers a bounty to anyone who cuts one down!

You can help to slow the spread of

invasive Callery pears, too. If you have one on your property, by all means, cut it down! If you’re looking for a low-growing, colorful native tree to replace it, flowering dogwood (*Cornus florida*), Eastern redbud (*Cercis canadensis*), serviceberry (*Amelanchier arborea*), and hawthorn (*Crataegus* sp.) are all excellent choices. You can also help spread the word to friends, family, and neighbors about the Callery pear – a tree that really stinks.

