

Callery (Bradford) Pear Trees: The Beauty That Became a Beast

Greenbelt is a unique place to live for many reasons, one being our extensive urban tree canopy which covers 62% of the City. These trees provide numerous aesthetic and environmental benefits that give residents a sense of place, comfort, and safety. A large part of this urban tree canopy is street trees that are maintained by the city's Department of Public Works.

Recently, the City approved the Greenbelt Urban Forest Master Plan (available at www.greenbeltmd.gov/public_works) which states that 28% of Greenbelt's street trees are callery (Bradford) pears. It is the dominant tree on many municipal streets and in many residents' yards. Unfortunately, behind the beauty of spring flowers, summer shade, and fall foliage, that this popular tree provides, is a beast that spreads ecological degradation and becomes a public safety hazard.

In 1908, it was discovered that the callery pear was resistant to fire-blight, a bacterial disease which was devastating agricultural pears in the U.S. Because of this the callery pear was used as a rootstock for agricultural pears to create a fire-blight resistant crop. Seed that was collected as part of an expedition to China in 1916 ended up in Glenn Dale, MD. It wasn't until the 1950's that John L. Creech, a horticulturalist at Glenn Dale, noticed a specimen that stood out from the rest of the callery pears grown at that location. He selected this specimen for mass production, naming it Bradford. After a successful trial planting was conducted in University Park, MD in 1954, Mr. Creech released cuttings of the Bradford Pear to the nursery trade in 1960. It was an aesthetically pleasing tree that was mass produced by the nursery trade and planted in almost every yard and town across the U.S. from 1960-1990's.

Since the 1990's the Bradford Pear's less appealing qualities have come to light. The Bradford Pear is sterile and does not produce fruit as long as it does not cross pollinate with another callery pear cultivar. As it would be, the nursery trade has created numerous other cultivars of the callery pear which are commonly used in the urban/suburban landscape. Cross pollination was inevitable and resulted in callery pear cultivars producing viable fruit. Birds and other wildlife eat this fruit and spread the seeds across the landscape where they grow to form dense impenetrable stands of callery pear. These stands outcompete native plants for light, space, nutrients, and water. Callery pears are a particular problem in open meadow areas and forest edges, causing it to be designated as an invasive plant species in Maryland.



The callery pear is not only an ecological concern, but it has also become a public safety concern. As trees age their limbs become prone to breakage, due to bad weather or simply their own weight. The wide canopy of the callery pear is due to the profuse growth of its limbs which join the main trunk at a V-shape. This creates a weak joint which starts to give as the limb grows larger and heavier, or as snow and ice collect on the limbs during winter storms. The result is large heavy limbs spontaneously breaking and falling on parked cars and potentially pedestrians.

This spontaneous breakage becomes a particular concern in trees over 20 years old, which is true of all of Greenbelt's callery pear street trees.

The love of trees in Greenbelt is well documented, and tree removal always raises concerns among City Council and residents alike. Unfortunately, when trees pose a hazard to persons and property, removal becomes necessary. The Greenbelt Urban Forest Master Plan suggests a phased-in cyclical six year tree care plan that includes the replacement of callery pear street trees. Callery pear replacement programs have been enacted in many have states, counties, and municipalities across the nation. Greenbelt Public Works is committed to providing safe public spaces for residents to enjoy, including the maintenance of street trees that line roadways and sidewalks. Greenbelt Public Works feels that this plan is a reasonable, responsible, and necessary way to make the City more aesthetically pleasing and reduce tree-related problems.

For more information visit <https://wapo.st/2Ho3Osa> or <https://arbordayblog.org/misctrees/the-bradford-pear-is-it-the-right-tree-for-you/>