

Avoid invasive trees such as Bradford Pears

Spring is a wonderful time to plant new trees and shrubs, but landscapers should be careful not to plant species that can harm native habitats such as woodlands. Bradford pear, for one, is an ornamental tree that has become invasive and chokes out native species in natural areas and parks. Gardeners and homeowners are urged to consider native alternatives for spring planting, such as the downy serviceberry.

Bradford pears have been planted in the past because they produce white flowers in spring, are hardy, and experts formerly considered them safe. Because they are hybrids, it was believed they could not produce viable seed.

But a varied mix of cultivars allowed some Bradford pears to cross pollinate and produce viable seed. Wildlife such as birds eat the fruits and scatter seeds, spreading the trees. Bradford pears, also called callery pears, compete well against native plants and trees because they leaf out early.

"It's also not a good ornamental tree because they're not strong," said Wendy Sangster, an urban forester for Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC). "They don't stand up well in storms and the limbs break easily."

An alternative is downy serviceberry, a native tree that produces a small red fruit edible for people and wildlife. The trees also produce showy white blooms in April and make good landscape additions.

A reliable and always showy native is the redbud tree. They're quick growing with lovely lavender early-spring flowers and shapely green summer foliage. Wild plum is another good alternative tree that provides showy white blooms in spring. Dogwood trees will grow and bloom in Kansas City if planted in shady areas.

Butterflies and birds like native wildflowers and trees in landscape settings. They utilize the flowers, fruits and sheltering branches. For information on natives, see <http://www.grownative.org>.

For more information about trees, go to <http://www.mdc.mo.gov/discover-nature/trees-work>. Heartland Tree Alliance offers information specific to the Kansas City area at <https://www.bridgingthegap.org/heartland-tree-alliance>.

Trees provide shade, clean air, scenery, wildlife habitat, lumber and boost property values. But extra care in choosing tree species and locations helps keep both the urban forest and wild lands healthy.