

An AWFULL Beautiful Tree

Most of us have driven the streets and neighborhoods of Fort Wayne in early spring and taken notice of the AWFULLY beautiful white flowering trees. Many of us may have even made a stop at the local



garden center to learn more about this tree and discovered that it is called a Bradford Pear. We likely also learned that there are plenty of them available for purchase. I would venture a guess that hundreds, if not thousands, were planted in Fort Wayne last spring alone. Now, I'm a tree guy. I love all trees. I love big trees, little trees, ugly trees, and even messy trees. Naming an awful tree would be a challenge...until recently.

It has always been evident to me that the pear trees came with some problems. They have weak branch attachments and frequently fail during high wind events. Marketed initially as fruitless, Bradford pears have become fruit-bearing over the years and this can get complicated. They can be a challenge for us to maintain at an elevation that doesn't interfere with vehicle and foot traffic. For these reasons, we weren't planting them...but we

weren't cutting them down either. I don't have the exact stats, but the Bradford pear must be (or at least has been) one of the most popular trees in America, and it turns out this is a disaster in the making. The Bradford Pear Tree is officially listed as an invasive species by the Indiana Invasive Species Council.

Learning time:

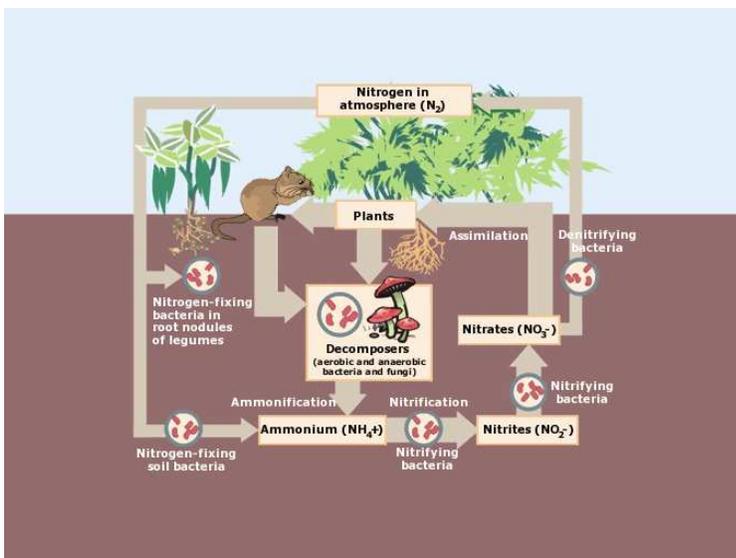
An invasive species is an organism that causes ecological or economic harm in a new environment where it is not native. ... Invasive species are capable of causing extinctions of native plants and animals, reducing biodiversity, competing with native organisms for limited resources, and altering habitats.

So how did this happen? There is some uncertainty on the exact timeline, but by one account the Bradford Pear was introduced by the US Department of Agriculture in the late 1960s as a sterile flowering ornamental tree. Not long after, it became clear that the introduced variety was relatively short-lived due to their weak branch structure. New varieties were introduced (Chanticleer Pear, Aristocrat Pear, Cleveland Select Pear) with improved branch structure to restore confidence in the AWFULLY beautiful Bradford Pear. Bradford Pears are, in fact, sterile and cannot reproduce among



themselves. An unintended consequence of introducing newer improved pear varieties is that they cross-pollinated with the original Bradford. The original, sterile Bradford Pear, along with their new and enhanced counterparts, have become very fruitful. Birds are now spreading their seeds everywhere. In a few weeks, it will become apparent by their TERRIBLY beautiful (and stinky, in my opinion) flowers just how aggressively they have taken over in some areas. The image above demonstrates just how aggressive these AWFULLY beautiful trees can be. The above photo (courtesy of Tolomay Studios) was taken at Thomas L. Deetz Nature Preserve in New Haven. Bradford Pears have overrun this space. How are we doing at “preserving” nature?

This is not a New Haven problem or an Indiana problem. This problem stretches across the entire United States.



A Bradford Pear gains its foothold in highly disturbed habitats where no maintenance has occurred. In early spring our rural meadows, pastures, woodland edges, ditches, and roadside edges are beaming with the gorgeous flowers of this AWFULLY beautiful tree. The Bradford Pear has even managed to take advantage of the carnage left behind within our forests by emerald ash borer. Emerald ash borer left thousands (millions?) of dead, standing ash trees. This allows for light to reach the forest floor and I don't know of a native tree or shrub aggressive enough to challenge

the Bradford Pear for the recently available space.

So what's the big deal? Throughout time, our ecosystem has evolved into a sensitive but perfectly functioning, well-oiled machine. This image is a simplification of the complexity of our ecosystem. When we step in and upset the system, all bets are off. Our friend, the Bradford Pear, has certainly upset the system. Due to the trees' wide seed dispersal, it spreads rapidly and outcompetes native vegetation. The Bradford Pear also has a rapid growth rate, extended growing season, ability to capture resources both above and below-ground, and unprecedented habitat adaptability. Once established, Bradford Pear thickets will engulf native flowers, grasses, and small trees.

So where do we go from here? Well, eradication is the best-case scenario, and we are probably too far along for this to be a reasonable goal. If you have a pear tree currently, consider removal and replacement with a native species, but don't let this pesky pear tree scare you away from heading out to your local garden center to find the perfect landscaping for your home. In fact, here is a link to a list of plants native to Indiana, any of which could be terrific in your yard:

<https://www.indianawildlife.org/wildlife/native-plants>

I often say that if trees gave off wifi signals instead of just clean air, we would probably save the world on accident. I hope that this will help you to make a more informed decision when you're thinking about your personal landscape, but in my opinion, I think everyone should PLANT TREES and lots of them.

Just not those AWFUL pear trees. 😊