

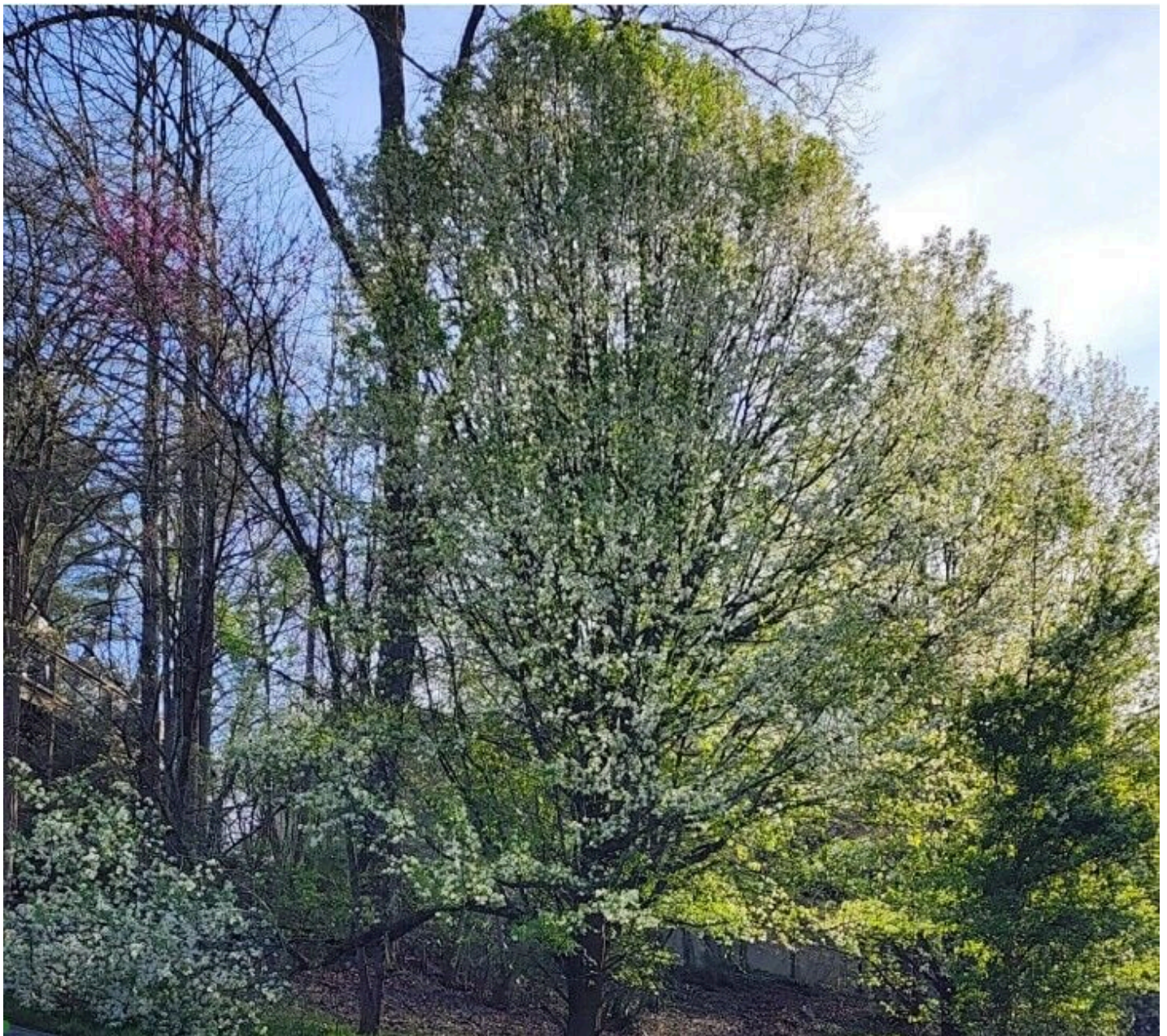
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FEATURED

## The Bradford Pear is the tree that broke its promise

Carrie Blair and Destini Petitt For The T. Times  
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**The ubiquitous Bradford pear trees** are invasive in our region and residents can plant alternative native trees.

Submitted photo



‘Bradford’ Callery Pear (*Pyrus calleryana*), one of many cultivars of the Callery Pear, is no longer an option for small ornamental trees in towns, parking lots or home decor.

Although claimed to be sterile and incapable of reproducing, since its introduction into the nursery trade in 1961 it has defied all expectations.

They are a non-native and highly invasive species found throughout the Southeast.

Being an invasive species means this tree originated elsewhere and now outcompetes the native species.

Bradford rapidly overtook the landscape wherever its seed dropped, spread far and wide by birds.

The white blossoms it produces in early spring, typically on its egg-shaped tree, and its glossy leaves turning dark red in the fall, made it the landscaper’s choice for decades.

It was planted in great numbers at airports, along main streets and in yards.

It was proclaimed as the perfect tree: not too tall with a compact shape.

It became ubiquitous: the Bradford cultivar was just one of many Callery pear selections promoted for 70 years after its dangerous characteristics manifested.

In March 2022, the city of Brevard began removing 16 Bradfords downtown after two cars were damaged when a large one toppled during a windstorm.

Narrow crotch angles caused its weak branching structure to self-destruct.

Bradfords are notorious for losing limbs without warning, with large segments threatening complete failure, often causing extensive damage to vehicles, buildings and power lines.

## **UNDERSTANDING HISTORY**

Researcher E.H. Wilson introduced *Pyrus calleryana* to the USA in 1908 to be used as rootstock for French pears.

By the mid-century, researchers recognized the Bradford's showy flowers, quick growth and adaptability. By the 1960s it was sold commercially as a landscape tree.

A full account of this tree's history can be found in Theresa Culley's 2017 article "The Rise and Fall of the Ornamental Callery Pear Tree" published by Harvard University Arboretum.

Bradfords were likely already invading roadsides and fields by the 1960s, but it wasn't until the 1990s that invasion was noticed in natural areas.

By the 2010s, they appeared across a variety of habitats, landing on invasive species lists throughout the Southeast.

The cause came down to cross-pollination, as these trees cannot fertilize themselves and require an unrelated individual.

Early Bradfords shared the same genetics and could not reproduce, but as new cultivars were introduced and planted nearby, cross-pollination occurred and the once self-sterile tree spread rampantly.

The Bradford has been severely over planted, allowing it to rapidly colonize open and woody areas, forming dense monocultures which devastate wildlife habitat, disrupt the food chain and alter surrounding soil chemistry.

This effectively stops other trees from growing nearby.

These trees are destroying acres of land and fundamentally threatening the ecological balance of the areas they invade.

## **WHAT YOU CAN DO**

There are several meaningful steps each of us can take to stop the spread.

Plant native trees instead.

The serviceberry (*Amelanchier* spp.) bursts into white bloom just as early as Bradfords in spring.

Whereas the native cherries (*Prunus* spp.) and Eastern redbud (*Cercis canadensis*) bring stunning color to the landscape.

For fall colors, dogwoods (*Cornus florida*) and blackgum (*Nyssa sylvatica*) rival any ornamental tree with their vibrant foliage.

Unlike the Bradford, these trees evolved alongside our local wildlife, providing critical food and habitat for native birds, pollinators and insects to support the full web of life. Speak with local nurseries and garden centers and encourage them to stop carrying Bradford or other Callery pear cultivars and stock native alternatives instead.

Advocate for stronger legislation.

Currently it is illegal to sell, buy or grow Bradford pear in South Carolina, Ohio and Pennsylvania, and similar policies are worth supporting here.

If you have a Bradford on your property, consider participating in a bounty program, which provides replacement trees for free when you remove a Bradford from your landscape.

Visit [erosionwnc.com/tidbits](https://erosionwnc.com/tidbits) for more information on North Carolina and surrounding state programs. Share what you've learned. Together we can protect our local ecosystems and replace the Bradford pear with trees that truly support the incredible diversity of life in western North Carolina.

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Carrie Blair and Destini Petitt serve on the Bradford Pear Committee of the North Carolina Native Plant Society's Land of the Sky chapter.

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