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Bradford Pear? Beware!

If you've driven through our area over the past two weeks, you have definitely seen at least one tree with white flowers. Those trees are ornamental pears. Ornamental pears are the pear equivalent of crabapples, close relatives of the fruiting pear that are prized less for their food production and more for their ornamental qualities. Breeders have developed many varieties, by far the most common is the Bradford pear, to the point that Bradford pear has become the common term for any ornamental pear tree, regardless of its actual variety.

Ornamental pears are prized for their site tolerance, gorgeous white flowers, and bright fall color, but these qualities come with some massive drawbacks, most notably the weakness of the wood. In the horticulture industry, ornamental pears are notorious for poor branching structure and wood that gets very brittle after 10-20 years. You will be hard-pressed to find an ornamental pear that does not have some kind of scar from where limbs have broken thanks to high winds, and this tendency towards branch failure can cause problems if planted near houses. If you're dead set on planting an ornamental pear, you can encourage stronger wood and good structure with selection and pruning in the tree's early life. Choose an improved variety, like Cleveland or Chanticleer, and look for a tree that already has a good structure. Over the tree's first few years, be diligent with pruning out problem limbs, and you will minimize the chance of failure in the future, although there are still many better options for nice-looking trees.

When selecting a tree, you should consider whether the tree is native or introduced. Introduced species will have a greater chance of becoming invasive and interrupting local ecosystems, usually through prolific reproduction. Ornamental pears will still put out small fruits about the size of a pea, and birds love these fruits, eating them and spreading the seeds. Ornamental pears are self-incompatible, which means that any tree that is self-pollinated or cross-pollinated with another tree of the same variety will not have seeds that will grow. However, if cross-pollinated with another variety or a wild-growing tree occurs, all of the seeds in the subsequent fruits will be viable and produce hundreds of pear tree seedlings wherever they are deposited, causing headaches for homeowners and pasture owners alike. Some native plants can be weedy in the

same way invasive plants are, but usually not to the detriment of other nearby plants, so these native tree species are preferred when planting new trees.

The two ornamental characteristics to look for when selecting a new tree are the flowers and the fall color. Flowers are the primary reason people want ornamental pears, but serviceberries, dogwoods, and silverbells are excellent native tree alternatives with white flowers. Redbuds are native trees with pink flowers, and tulip poplars will have large yellow flowers, although they will get much bigger than ornamental pears and need a lot of space. One final option for a good pear alternative is the crabapple. Most crabapples will not be native, but they do not exhibit the same invasive tendencies as ornamental pears, and will still support the birds with fruits while giving you brilliant pink blooms to enjoy.

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