

About trees: Bradford pears' flaws no match for their beauty

By Fred Morgan

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It seems that almost in the blink of an eye, the flowers on our pear trees have turned a brilliant white one more time.

Of course, they too can be fooled by the weather and our fickle pre-spring warm spells.

But we can take some comfort now knowing that spring is not far away. These ubiquitous trees are indeed one of the first signs of the return of life, right along with the yellow blooms of the forsythia.

In my mind, the appearance of the long white ranks of flowering pear trees and the gaggles of bicycles on the streets go together as a primary hallmark of the welcome return of life in Memphis.

But like beauty anywhere, there are even in arborial matters a few flaws to be found if one looks hard enough. For the sparkling Bradford pear, the endemic flaw is twofold. First is its unusually high propensity for physical self-destruction due to its dense canopy that collects so much wind force and rainwater weight above those tightly angled and poorly formed limb forks. When Bradfords get to a certain size, many of them just seem to be begging to de-limb themselves.

The tree's second and possibly more insidious flaw is its high susceptibility to a bacterial disease called fire blight.

Although fire blight can also infect crabapples, rosebushes, cotoneaster, ash and hawthorn, the pear, maybe because of its large numbers locally, seems to be the most frequent victim. The term fire blight is descriptive, taking its name from the scorched appearance of clusters of leaves, usually near the terminal ends of the branches.

These brown curled leaf clusters are laden with infectious spores that can overwinter from season to season and progressively debilitate the tree as well as posing a threat to nearby neighboring pears.

The remedy for this problem in larger trees can be somewhat labor intensive. It involves pruning as much of the diseased material as possible by making cuts 6 inches back into the healthy, nonsymptomatic tissue with tools that are disinfected after every pruning cut with a dilution of alcohol, Clorox or Lysol. Then the cut material, as well as the brown leaves fallen to the ground, must be collected and destroyed or removed.

The second part of the regimen requires injection of the tree with an antibiotic at or close to the time of flowering in the spring. Typically, this must be done by a trained arborist who has access to streptomycin or tetracycline in a tree-injectible form.

While possibly more trouble than some other landscape trees, pears are undoubtedly stellar show pieces in the springtime and, at least for a time, can provide full green screens and shade to a variety of landscapes.

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