When Beauty becomes the Beast

Spring is my favorite season as the plants start to come to life and the early blooming trees and shrubs are covered with their yearly mantle of beautiful blooms. Right now, the redbud, magnolia and ornamental pear trees are blooming in people’s yards. Growing up, the Ornamental Pear was the king of the spring blooming trees with it’s beautiful white blooms, glossy green foliage during the summer and purple fall color. Unfortunately, this “King of Spring” eventually turned into an invasive nightmare and joined a group of landscape favorites that have turned into plant bullies. How could this happen and why can we still purchase Ornamental Pears now? Let’s find out.

The original Ornamental Pear was a variety that went by the name of “Bradford” and while it had beautiful, but smelly, flowers the tree was fruitless and most people willingly overlooked the slightly unpleasant flower smell for the blooms. As the trees grew it became apparent that the branching structure of the tree caused it to break under wind and other storms so the hybridizers began to develop varieties with stronger branch structures. This is where the issue began, pear trees need another variety of pear to cross pollinate to produce fruit. As new varieties appeared on the market and were planted the once fruitless Ornamental Pear started to develop small marble sized pears. These pears are simply a mess to clean up for homeowners but birds love them and will happily spread the seeds throughout the area. The pears that come up from the seeds have thorns and are prolific bloomers that start producing fruit at a young age which has further acerbated the issue leading to the Ornamental Pear tree being listed as an invasive species in several states plus a plague of baby pears spreading in locations they weren’t planted. This is unfortunately how the “King of Spring” turned from a spring beauty into a nightmare of a beast joining the bush honeysuckle, Japanese Barberry and in some states the burning bush as invasive species.

One of the best characteristics of the Ornamental Pear was that it was a tough tree that could withstand a variety of soil conditions and thrive. Those formerly desirable characteristics are making it a tough customer to control now that it has escaped. The best control will be found in a combination of cutting or mowing the small pear trees and treating the stumps or spraying small trees with a combination of glyphosate and triclopyr. If the pears are in a pasture setting burning can help set them back, however with their deep root system and ability to sucker they will return with a vengeance so additional control measures will need to be made. There are areas that are offering a program to provide a new tree if you can bring proof you have cut down.

If you are looking for a spring blooming tree to include in your landscape, don’t choose an Ornamental Pear. There are several alternatives that have far fewer issues and still provide the beautiful spring color. One of our native trees, the Redbud has beautiful purple blooms in the spring and is adapted to a variety of conditions. It can grow from seed however they are easy to remove and control. The flowering dogwood is another native small tree/large shrub that can be planted as an alternative. The beautiful white blooms transition to excellent foliage that turns red in the fall. Another option is the Flowering Crabapple that comes in a variety of bloom colors, sizes, shapes and leaf colors. This beautiful tree is disease resistant and with the amount of options you can find a Crabapple for almost any location. The one downside is some varieties do have small “apples” that can leave a mess. In our area a Magnolia tree is also an option for a replacement tree that has gorgeous blooms in the spring. There are several varieties that have different bloom colors depending on the size and shape of plant you want.

The Ornamental Pear is still a beautiful tree every spring and fall however it’s issues of being invasive coupled with a weak branching structure have made it a plant that I cannot recommend anyone plant. At this time, you can still purchase these trees because the state has not placed a ban on them. There are a variety of alternatives that are overall...
better trees. I won’t say you have to remove the Ornamental Pear if you already have one planted but I would start to work on an exit strategy because sooner or later it will need to be removed. Unfortunately, these trees are still available for sale across the state but they should not be planted in our area.

Reminders-
- Check your houseplants for unwanted visitors. It’s also time to start transplanting your houseplants and fertilizing them as they begin to actively grow with the longer days.
- Remove last year’s growth from your asparagus beds. You can pull or cut the old fronds or you can mow the old growth off.
- Prevent “weedwacker disease” on trees and shrubs by using a ring of mulch around your trees. Remember we want a crater around the tree not a volcano mounded up to the trunk.

Upcoming Events
- **April 6, 2022: Pollinator Plants for Continuous Food Sources**
  Include plants for pollinators in your spring planting plan! Providing season-long pollen and nectar sources in the garden is critical for our pollinators to forage on, and an important way to help increase local pollinator numbers. Join Jason Graves, Central Kansas District Horticulture Extension Agent, to learn about the planting strategies and pollinator garden plants that will help you supply pollinators with the critical foraging habitat they need. For more information on KSRE Garden Hour click here.
- **April 21st- 6:30 pm- Composting and Gardening Basics**
  Spring has sprung and with-it gardening season has begun. Compost can be an amazing addition to your garden and flower beds but it can be intimidating to get started. As we start the gardening season join us to learn how to successfully compost your lawn, garden and kitchen scraps, learn some common issues and troubleshooting guides along with some different options for composting bins. The class will also cover some troubleshooting and common issues of issues you have in your garden this season. Register here to allow for enough handouts.
- **May 4, 2022: New and Improved Annual Flower Varieties**
  New and improved varieties of annual flowers hit the garden center shelves every year. Which varieties will provide you outstanding summer performance? Join Matthew McKernan, Sedgwick County Horticulture Extension Agent as he highlights new varieties of annual flowers with outstanding performance, along with tips for growing annual flowers more successfully this summer! For more information on KSRE Garden Hour click here.