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News Release

## **The Decline of the Bradford Pear**

The Bradford pear tree, once the undisputed king of many an Alabama landscape, has fallen on hard times.

As it turns out, the demise of the tree is laced with irony. By all accounts, they are beautiful trees. They bloom reliably every year and grow in all kinds of conditions. They're also resistant to disease and insects.

The trees also are prized for their rapid growth, spring flowers, glossy green summer foliage, uniform shape, and vibrant fall color, according to Kerry Smith, coordinator of Extension's Master Gardener Program.

Even so, despite all the beauty they've lent to countless Southern landscapes, they are plagued with one fatal flaw.

The tree's fatal combination of vigorous plant growth, weak wood, and poor branch structure often becomes painfully apparent after twenty years when parts of the canopy either collapse under their own weight or are sheared off by strong winds after about 20 years.

As many communities have learned, the trees even can become political hot potatoes. Earlier this year, for example, concerns about the tree's potential risk to passing motorists prompted the Alabama Department of Transportation to remove Bradford pear trees along U.S. Highway 31 in Vestavia and Homewood. Predictably, it sparked a lively debate about the tree's pros and cons.

Nevertheless, tree experts say homeowners and others would be better off choosing other varieties. Fortunately for them, there is a wide variety of alternative trees that are attractive and durable.

Fast-growing alternatives, Smith says, include the Chinese Pistache and the Japanese Zelkova. While these are larger trees, 40 feet and 80 feet tall respectively, both Pistache and Zelkova are sturdy, fast growing trees. Chinese Pistache additionally has excellent fall foliage.

If you prefer spring, white flowers, some good alternatives are Crabapples, Serviceberry, Texas redbud, Rusty blackhaw or Possumhaw viburnums and Fringe trees. They grow to between 20 and 40 feet tall, depending on the species, Smith says.

Callaway is a dependable Crabapple for our state's long, hot growing season, Smith says. She describes another alternative, Serviceberries, as lovely native trees that add wildlife food and fall foliage color to the landscape. Both these also add tasty fruit to your table, she says.

Texas redbud has white flowers instead of the pink familiar in Alabama's woodlands. Otherwise, this Southwest tree is very similar to native Alabama trees.

Rusty blackhaw and Possumhaw viburnums may remind you of dogwood with their growth habits, bark textures and rich red to purple fall colors.

Two fringe trees are also available in nurseries: the American fringe tree displays an informal look, while the Chinese fringe tree grows a more compact canopy. The trees have glossy leaves like Bradford pear.

Bradford pear trees first gained national prominence in the 1950s when researchers with the Agriculture Research Service in Glenn Dale, Maryland, noticed an especially promising tree grown from seed collected in China more than a half century earlier.

It took another couple of decades for the tree to gain popularity in the Southeast. By then, the plantings could be detected all over the place --- on home landscapes, along roads, and even in highway medians.

However, time turned out to be our best teacher, Smith says. Observing Bradford pear trees in a variety of settings helped us understand the very obvious shortfalls of a tree that first leaves an impression of beauty.

For more about this topic or other horticulture related information, please contact Charles Pinkston, Regional Extension Agent-Home Horticulture, Home Gardens and Home Pest Management at the St. Clair County Extension Office at (205) 338-9416 or email [pinksch@auburn.edu](mailto:pinksch@auburn.edu).

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