by Luke Williamson, education intern

Thousands of plants have been introduced to the United States from other parts of the world. Some have come here accidentally in seed stock, while others were brought here intentionally for horticultural use. A small number of these introduced plants have gotten a little too comfortable in their new environment. Because they have no native predators and produce a lot of fruit and seed that are efficiently dispersed, they are invading natural areas. The aggressiveness of these invasive plants affects natural areas and wildlife by decreasing biodiversity, competing with native and rare plants and eliminating wildlife habitat and food sources. Plant This, Not That features a list of native alternatives to a commonly used landscape plant that has become invasive. The alternatives were chosen because their characteristics -- form, flowers, fruit or fall color -- are similar to that of the invasive and fulfill the same landscaping need. Plants that are native to Ohio are recommended when possible as native species are generally well-adapted to local climates and provide additional resources for wildlife. However, there are many non-native plants on the market that are also non-invasive and possess great ornamental value.

The Invasive

Pyrus calleryana (Callery pear)

Callery pear, a native of China, was introduced to the United States during the early 20th century by the USDA as a fire blight-resistant rootstock for pear orchards. Though the fruits of Callery pear are too small and impalatable to be grown as an orchard species, its broad pyramidal form, spring blossoms and fall color led to the tree’s recognition as a superb ornamental by the 1950s. In response to the discovery that branches of the popular ‘Bradford’ cultivar were prone to breaking in adverse weather, many sturdier cultivars were introduced, such as ‘Arbósocrat’ and Cleveland Select. The relatively recent invasions of Callery pear trees in natural areas are likely due to the growing popularity of different cultivars over the last few decades. Though all of these cultivars are self-sterile, their flowers cross-pollinate with those of other cultivars, resulting in high production of fruit. The spalled, brown fruits are often eaten and dispersed by birds to open, disturbed areas, such as along roadides or underneath power lines. These ‘escaped’ Callery pear trees grow rapidly and create dense thickets that shade out other plant species and compete with them for resources.

The Alternative

Amelanchier laevis (Alleghany serviceberry)

While serviceberry doesn’t have the compact, symmetrical form of the Callery pear, it certainly makes up for it with its flower, fruit and fall color. Native to Northeast Ohio and hardy to Zone 4, Alleghany serviceberry is fast growing when young but remains a short tree, usually growing to about 15-25 feet in height. Its clustered, white blossoms of early spring give serviceberry its alternate common name, “shadbush” as its blossom time coincides with the yearly upstream migration of shad fish. Serviceberry also goes by the name of Juneberry, named after the month in which its delicious, purple-black berries ripen. The fruits can be made into jams, pies and fruit leather if they are harvested before birds discover them. Serviceberry’s fine-toothed, elliptical foliage turns an eye-catching red-orange in the fall. Plant it in full sun or partial shade in average-to-rich soils. The tree is fairly drought-tolerant once established. Downy serviceberry (A. arborea) and apple serviceberry (A. x grandiflora) are also great alternatives to Callery pear. Serviceberries will be one of the trees planted this spring along the new R. Henry Norweb Jr. Tree Aisle leading to the new Rhododendron Discovery Garden.

Malus ‘Adirondack’ (Adirondack flowering crab)

Highly rated by the International Ornamental Crabapple Society for its compact form, heavy flower displays and disease resistance, Adirondack flowering crab is an ideal alternative to the Callery pear. This slow-growing tree, hardly to Zone 4, generally remains under 20 feet tall. That, along with its upright branching habit, gives it a compact form that works well in foundation plantings near buildings or as a specimen tree in smaller spaces. Adirondack’s large, white blossoms densely cover long upright branches, giving it the appearance of a fountain of flowers in the springtime. Small, red-orange fruit take the place of the flowers and persist on the tree into the fall, attracting birds and other wildlife. Adirondack is also a very low-maintenance tree. It is adaptable to diverse soil, moisture and climate conditions and requires virtually no pruning or pesticides. Furthermore, it is highly resistant to fire blight, apple scab and many of the other diseases that plague most apples. A few ‘Adirondack’s are planted fairly close to Sperry Road, about 400 feet north of the entry driveway to the Corning Visitor Center.

Lacer rubrum ‘Red Rocket’ (Red Rocket red maple)

The aptly-named ‘Red Rocket’ red maple is a fairly new introduction from the U.S. National Arboretum. Selected from a seedling in northern Minnesota, ‘Red Rocket’ is one of the most cold-hardy red maple cultivars on the market. Its vertical branching structure gives the tree a tight, columnar form that grows to a maximum height of about 35 feet, about half the height of the species. Its narrow spread allows it to be planted in smaller spaces. Expect the same stunning red autumn display that you would see in the species. While red maples do not have the showy white blossoms presented by Callery pear, the intricate beauty of their small crimson flowers reward those willing to take a closer look during the early spring.

The Survivor Tree

This Callery pear was recovered from the rubble of the World Trade Center with nearly all of its limbs broken off. It was nursed back to health and replanted at Ground Zero in 2010. worldtrade-center.com