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Student-led Group Volunteers to Remove Invasive Trees from Campus

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A voluntary group of students and district personnel has begun to remove hundreds of non-native, invasive pear trees from the Poplar Bluff High School campus.

The PBHS Science and Environment Club partnered with the FFA to take on the project on Sunday, March 27, soliciting help from the Maintenance Department, among other individuals.

“It matters to our students,” explained PBHS biology teacher Gretchen Pendley, who sponsors the club. “We can’t fix all the big problems, but we can do some small work.”

Two years ago the Science Club, which concentrated mostly on chemistry, expanded to consider issues related to human impact on the environment, according to Pendley. The new organization decided to start by making a difference in their own backyard, but the pandemic caused the postponement of their first major project.

PBHS agriculture teacher and FFA sponsor Kathryn Clark said that Callery pear trees, better known as Bradfords, have been on her radar since the campus relocation of 2016. “It’s a beautiful campus, but we also want it to be sustainable and environmentally friendly,” she said. “Bradfords do more damage than good.”

Native to China, the white flowering trees are popular for landscaping because of their “ornamental value,” according to junior Emmalein Pendley, Environment Club vice

president, but they have no “wildlife value.” They crowd out habitats needed by birds and wildlife, out-competing native vegetation for light, water and nutrients, according to state conservation experts.

In addition, Bradfords have “no predator” or natural enemy, said Gretchen Pendley. The aggressive Callery pears were made available here in the 1950s because of their resistance to diseases such as fire blight. They became invasive when new cultivars cross-pollinated with the commercial variety, producing trees bearing small fruit with viable seeds that birds such as starlings eat and spread, allowing for escaped trees, according to the University of Missouri Extension.

Lastly, Bradfords are “weak trees,” Clark went on. Since they are known to grow quickly with poor branch angles, the soft-wooded limbs are often split in high winds, according to the Missouri Department of Conservation. The expansive root system, partial to soil types common in the Midwest, deems the tree difficult to kill

R-I Maintenance Supervisor Colt Sievers headed up the eradication last weekend, along with his brother David, PBHS health teacher and football coach, later disposing of the downed trees with a tractor and grappling hook at an approved burn site. Sievers said treating the stumps with herbicide would also be necessary to destroy the root.

“Education and learning to be good stewards” will be essential going forward, since “one day I will be too old to hold a chainsaw,” Sievers pointed out. He joked how his daughter Audrey, a PBHS junior, informed him what he would be doing with his time that day and he simply agreed. “I was volun-told,” he continued.

Incoming president for Missouri FFA Area 16, Audrey Sievers completed a supervised agricultural experiment over the summer involving a pesky weed known as sericea lespedeza also identified on the hillside east of campus, and her father helped her get its spread under control as well. She admitted that prior to educating herself on its ecosystem, she—like many—just thought the Bradfords added some color to campus.

“If it’s not helping, we don’t need it; it serves no purpose,” Audrey Sievers said. “It’s a long process, but if we start working toward a goal now, future generations will benefit.”

Alternative options of flowering trees, the group variously suggested, include Eastern redbuds, dogwoods, tulip poplars, white fringe trees and serviceberries. The Missouri Invasive Plant Task Force, formed several years ago, is collaborating to host buy-back events later this month throughout the state, including in Cape Girardeau, to replace Calleries cut down by property owners with free native trees. Visit moinvasives.org for more information about state invasive species management efforts.

PBHS students drag Bradford limbs cut down around Mules Stadium by David and Colt Sievers to a large pile.

Pictured: With the supervision of teacher sponsors, students volunteer to gather clipped branches along the Oak Grove Road campus on a recent Sunday afternoon.

Article and photo by Tim Krakowiak, Communications/Marketing Director, Poplar Bluff R-I School District

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