



BEIJING VS THE FLYING CATKINS

by Justine Lopez and Dominique Wong

Last month, Beijing's municipal government announced plans to sterilize 300,000 female poplars and willow trees in an attempt to control the number of flying catkins that beset the city every spring, causing fires and allergies.

The announcement is part of the local government's ongoing drive to control the yearly nuisance. Catkins are cotton-like seed balls that derive from the poplar and willow trees that were planted in the capital in the 1960s and 70s as part of a city beautification project. It is estimated that of the 120 million trees the government planted back then, 70 percent were female.

The balls burst seemingly out of nowhere when the temperature hits 15 degrees Celsius during spring, making the city look like the inside of a snow globe.

According to Du Jianjun, an official with the Beijing Municipal Landscape and Forestry Bureau, additional catkin-control methods include water-blasting trees and picking up fallen seeds, reports Xinhua.

Because although catkins look pretty – and kind of funny, especially when they gather into tumbleweed – they actually do a lot of damage.

Besides being a general annoyance, like when they get stuck in your ears, eyes and throat, catkins can also result in moderate-to-serious allergies among some people. Take a former *That's* staffer, for example, who decided to make a catkin-beard only to come down with a serious reaction to the fluff – so serious he had to rush to the nearest restaurant to wash it off.

Spring catkins have also been linked to an increase in fires in the city. Catkins are highly flammable and cause fires to spread quickly.

In May 2013, at least 105 fires broke out in a single week in Beijing, and catkins were involved in every single one. In one instance, a woman lit a bunch of catkins on fire and accidentally burned down a bus and two cars. Last April, the balls of fluff were responsible for half of the fires in Beijing. According to the Beijing fire department, 686 fires were reported in the capital, and 346 of those blazes were catkin-related.

At the time of writing, there have been no reported instances of catkin-induced fires this year. But catkins have been in the news for another reason entirely. Last month, a video of Hong Kong celebrity Nicholas Tse 'eating' catkins went viral. It looks more like

candy floss on a stick, although the TV chef and food critic is standing in what appears to be a storm of catkins.

Last month's announcement isn't the first time the local government has made efforts to eliminate catkins. In 1994, Beijing launched a "Millions of Male Poplars" initiative, which resulted in trees being injected with hormones in an attempt at "sex reassignment." However, this method proved time-consuming and expensive.

Since 2001, only male poplars and willow trees have been allowed to be planted in Beijing. The initiative was intended to completely rid the capital of catkins by 2005, though clearly that did not happen.

And just last year, 400,000 trees were treated, with the plan to reduce catkins to a level where they "do not cause disaster" by 2020.