

Community Trees

Establishing a Community Tree Program

Introduction

Imagining cities and towns without trees is difficult. An estimated 60 million trees (valued at approximately 30 billion dollars) line municipal streets in the United States. Many millions more are spent annually to maintain these valued urban trees. However, large budgets for community tree planting and maintenance have not always existed. Only after Dutch Elm disease almost eradicated the American elm from many eastern and midwestern cities did people realize the importance of city trees. Such trees are invaluable components of the landscape, significantly enhancing the quality of life in the urban environment.

Why should a community plant trees when city and town budgets must support so many other demands? It is not enough to reply that trees will make things look pretty. Urban foresters, landscape architects, and horticulturists often resort to economic arguments in order to get their message across and justify their programs. Such arguments rely on quantifying the benefits the tree provides—a cost/benefit rationale justifying the costs of planting and maintaining trees. Though difficult to quantify, research designed to measure the benefits of trees, showing their worth to our communities, is substantial and increasing.

Benefits of Community Trees

As architectural elements, trees create interest with their ever-changing colors and textures. They act as unifiers, pulling together disparate elements in the urban landscape. They serve to soften and smooth (or de-emphasize) harsh angles and lines of individual buildings. As articulators, trees help to clarify, delineate, and emphasize areas. Because of their natural beauty, trees help to humanize harsh city landscapes by encouraging people to stop, reflect, and relax (figure 1).

Trees modify the urban climate by slowing wind movement, by reducing irritating noise levels, controlling glare and reflection from buildings, cooling city streets in summer, and purifying air as they filter out pollutants and add oxygen to the immediate environment. Properly placed trees can reduce residential heating and cooling costs by an estimated 20 to 50 percent. Trees also have real estate value. According to the U.S. Forest Service, trees increase property values by 10 to 15 percent (figure 2).



Figure 1. Trees humanize harsh city landscapes.



Figure 2. Trees increase property values by 10 to 15 percent.

Starting a Program

Although the benefits of the community forest are well known, effective programs to manage this resource are lacking in many communities in Iowa. Often this can be attributed to a lack of interest, or more accurately, a lack of someone with the interest and persistence to establish or improve a program. The first task in starting a program, then, is to find and identify that interested someone. That person need not be a professional tree care worker. He or she need only have an enthusiastic compassion for and conviction about the value of trees, and a commitment to develop a long-range community tree program.

This person could be you!

Once committed, this person (or group of people) can then assemble others who are interested in improving the community forest. Citizen support is essential. Among those likely to be willing to listen are the Kiwanis, Lions, Rotary, Jaycees, League of Women Voters, garden clubs, chamber of commerce, and local civic organizations. Representatives from local nurseries can be helpful, as well as

tree care firms, the state forestry agency, and county Extension staff. Someone from the city staff should be included—perhaps from the city planning office, the parks and recreation department, or the city street department. A member of the city council, or at least a representative from that group, should be included. Without support from the community's council or governing board, a self-appointed tree group that proposes an unsolicited program will have a poor chance of long-term success, regardless of the merit of its proposals.

Finally, this group of “tree people” might include local utility representatives, who may have the best understanding of the current status of trees in the community. In addition, the state urban forestry coordinator can provide information and contacts from other nearby communities with community forestry programs. This individual can be a resource for newsletters, meetings, workshops, and other opportunities.

Once this coalition of interested persons is identified, the group can proceed to develop a community

tree or forestry program. Focus should be on both short- and long-term goals. People from communities with established programs may be able to help. But do not try to copy another program, even a successful one. Tailor your program to your community, observing existing local constraints and capitalizing on your unique resources and opportunities.

The Community Tree Board

The group described above could become the nucleus of a community tree board. An early focus of the group should be to cultivate support for a community tree program, and demonstrate that support. This may best be accomplished through a survey in which residents are asked if they would support an urban forestry program. Such a survey can often be conducted at very low cost, and with an extremely high return rate.

In order to provide for an on-going and official tree program in the community, the tree board must, at some point, make a presentation to the local government for the purpose of gaining formal recognition. This may take the form of a request to the mayor and/or council to recognize a community tree commission, and charge the group with specific duties. The charge could be to investigate the need for hiring a full-time or part-time tree manager, arborist, or urban forester. Or the charge could be to develop a plan for tree care in the community, or perhaps to draft a tree care ordinance.

Upon receiving its formal charge the community tree commission should immediately begin the planning process. The commission may begin work on establishing or revising a community tree ordinance, or it may begin a sys-

tematic inventory of existing trees. But from its inception, the community tree commission should devote substantial effort both to public relations and to program financing.

Effective Tree Care Programs

As communities proceed with efforts to improve their community forest, they often seek and receive recognition. Many communities consider their programs successful if they qualify for a Tree City USA award. The Tree City USA program, administered by the National Arbor Day Foundation and the State Forester's office, recognizes communities that have:

- a tree board or department (legally established by the city council),
- a community tree ordinance,
- a community forestry program with an annual budget of at least \$2 per capita, and
- an Arbor Day observance and proclamation.

Earning the Tree City USA award every year is an excellent initial goal for a developing program. The award is proof that the com-

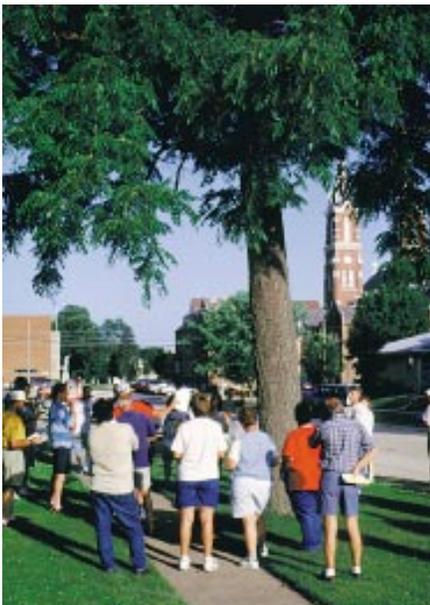


Figure 3. Education and outreach to citizens are important components of a community tree program.

munity has taken the time to develop a highly visible, funded program that involves citizen input, one that fosters care of existing trees while planning for future tree planting efforts.

Other indicators of a good community tree program include:

- trained tree workers and arborists in public and private tree care;
- annual work plans for tree planting and follow-up care for the long-term;
- developing or working under a master plan that involves all major city infrastructure;
- initial and continuing participation in new developments and growth areas;
- inventories or assessments of the tree resource;
- education and outreach to citizens, school children, teachers, and political and city leaders (figure 3);
- citizen and leader participation in planning and implementing tree care programs and events; and
- media coverage of community tree conditions, tree care activity, and citizen involvement and recognition.

Programs that meet these criteria and those suggested by the Tree City USA program will continue to grow and be effective. Above all, it is important to remember that there is much more than tree management in a community forestry program—there are people involved. Only when the public is involved will a program have the support to become a positive driving force in the community.

Generating Public Support

Public relations should play a part in every activity of the community tree program. Tree removal,

maintenance, planting, and insect and disease control all should be preceded by a public announcement explaining what is going on and why. Understanding will lead to public acceptance.

Understanding and acceptance cannot occur without two-way communication. Public meetings are essential for adequate communication to occur. Community tree commission members must be accessible. Arranged communication between the commission and community residents can make the difference between program success and failure.

The establishment of a monthly newsletter, regular public meetings, and/or an annual report will help keep the community informed about the program. The media can be extremely helpful. Excellent publicity can be provided by the airing of public service announcements by radio stations, and by regular exposure in promotional features in the newspaper. A weekly or monthly newspaper column with tips on landscaping, tree care, tree selection, insect and disease problems, or other topics could be sponsored by the tree commission. Community forestry presentations to local clubs and organizations also can be valuable to a program. These “civic-minded” groups frequently take on community beautification projects. They can be instrumental in accomplishing the goals of the community tree commission.

Make use of every opportunity to plant commemorative trees—the opening of a new building, park, or store; the graduation of the local high school class; or the death of a community figure. Consider starting a memorial forest in a park—a place for planting trees for loved ones. Consider a children's forest where

parents may plant a tree at the birth of a child. Arbor Day (celebrated on the last Friday in April in Iowa) offers an excellent opportunity to focus attention on the community forest. Ceremonies can range from single tree plantings to elaborate celebrations lasting days or weeks. Each community will develop its own means of promoting community forestry, restricted only by the limits of imagination. Whatever techniques are used, be aware that the continued success of the program depends on how well it is promoted.

Funding the Program

Without adequate funding, previously established goals and policies may never be realized. Program funding is the most important problem to be solved if a community tree program is to succeed. The tree commission should look to five areas for funding support: individual property owners, community action projects, the city budget, public utilities, and federal cost-sharing.



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Prepared by Jeff Iles, extension horticulturist, in conjunction with the Iowa Urban and Community Forestry Council.

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The community tree commission can help individual property owners plant and maintain street trees:

- by providing pictures and lists of recommended street trees;
- by sponsoring projects that give the property owner an opportunity to purchase trees for street planting; and,
- by sponsoring planting and pruning demonstrations.

Community action projects can raise substantial funds for community forestry programs. Consider pancake breakfasts, garage sales, raffles, races, game booths, tournaments, craft and bake sales, and street fairs. Local businesses, service organizations, or individual neighborhoods may be interested in “adopting” a city park or block, and providing for both its tree care and planting.

Traditionally, communities have relied on assessments and levies worked into the city budget to raise funds for forestry programs. Or, they have billed homeowners directly. Each financing method has its advantages and disadvantages. When considering funding

options for your community, be sure you remain within the legal boundaries of your city charter.

Finally, public utilities and federal cost-sharing plans may provide matching funds for a community tree program.

Summary

This publication is intended to help cities and towns develop and administer a community tree program. Because communities are unique, the program should be tailored specifically for each community. But active involvement of citizen volunteers is always essential for success.

The urban forest is dynamic. Both a master plan and a program are needed not only to monitor dynamics, but to interject intelligent change that will maximize and sustain the forest's contribution to the community. Developing and implementing a community forestry program is within the means of any community, large or small. Tree commissions that foster interest, enthusiasm, and commitment do so both for the benefit of trees, and for the community in general.

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- Iowa State University Extension Forestry, Ames, Iowa 50011, (515) 294-1168.
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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Stanley R. Johnson, director, Cooperative Extension Service, Iowa State University of Science and Technology, Ames, Iowa.