

# Urban Tree Planting

*There are a variety of ways to prioritize planting trees, which offer countless benefits.*



*(Photo courtesy of CityTrees)*

## The Impact

The impact of trees stretches far and wide. They help reduce pollution, make streets safer, reduce stress, provide oxygen, filter drinking water, lower temperatures and provide shade, remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, provide habitats, increase property values and more. Trees can also block some rainfall to decrease the pressure on stormwater drainage systems.

Additionally, trees provide a monetary benefit. For example, trees planted in the City of San Mateo, California's urban areas provide over \$1.4 million in net benefits. The city further encourages urban tree planting through the Free Street Tree Planting Program, which runs from November to March and allows applicants to plant a tree in the right of way in front of the applicant's home, free of charge.

Through the ArborDay program, Tree City USA has encouraged more than 3,500 communities in the U.S. to commit to taking care of and planting more trees, and has planted over a million trees, investing over a billion dollars into urban tree planting. Another volunteer group, CityTrees, has planted nearly 4,000 trees.

## Description

Tree planting programs can take many forms, from city-level recognition such as Tree Cities USA provides, to nonprofit organizations like CityTrees, to partnerships between businesses and

schools. In addition, planting trees in certain locations or choosing tree species carefully can provide specific benefits. For example, planting fruit or nut trees along streets can provide people with free food and a fun activity. Planting native trees can provide habitats for other native species. Adding trees as a barrier between streets and sidewalks can improve pedestrian safety and decrease driver stress. In fact, a study found that planting trees in urban arterial roadsides decreased mid-block crash rates up to 20%.

Tree City USA is a national recognition program encouraging cities and other incorporated municipalities to invest time, money and energy in tree planting and continuous care. The program began in 1976 and it is sponsored by the Arbor Day Foundation, the U.S. Forest Service and the National Association of State Foresters. To be named a Tree City USA, a city must satisfy four requirements (see below, under “Key Factors for Success”). Once the city has met these requirements and celebrates Arbor Day, it can apply to become a Tree City USA. Cities must renew their applications annually.

CityTrees is an example of how volunteers can make a difference in a city. CityTrees is a nonprofit that works to plant and maintain trees in urban areas in Redwood City. It works with various other organizations in the city, including its Public Works Department, to plant trees along streets, on school campuses and on other public properties. CityTrees also focuses on educating people and advocating for urban trees.

### **Where It's Been Implemented**

Half of the cities in San Mateo County are Tree Cities USA: Belmont, Burlingame, Colma, Menlo Park, Millbrae, Pacifica, Redwood City, San Carlos, San Mateo and South San Francisco. In California, as of 2022, there were 159 Tree City USA communities and 52% of the state population lived in a Tree City USA community. The four requirements for becoming a Tree City USA Community are (1) a Tree Board or Tree Department, (2) a Tree Care ordinance, (3) a Community Forestry Program that has a yearly budget of at least \$2/person and (4) an Arbor Day Proclamation and Observance.

CityTrees has been serving the greater Redwood City area since 2000. It is a volunteer-run organization that aims to ensure an equitable distribution of trees across the community.

### **Key Drivers**

Numerous environmental problems are facing San Mateo County and the world in general, from climate change driven by CO2 emissions to poor indoor and outdoor air quality, to loss of habitats and biodiversity to erosion and water pollution. Planting trees can help mitigate effects from all of these problems.

Furthermore, wildfires in California have been getting more frequent and severe. Eighty percent of forest restoration needed in the U.S. National Forests is due to wildfires. In areas where wildfires have destroyed trees, replanting will help minimize erosion and water pollution.

### **Key Factors for Success**

To successfully plant trees, it is important to consider carefully why, where and how to plant trees. For example, planting native tree species is important in order not to threaten biodiversity and also to provide habitats for native species. Native trees are usually well adapted to the local climate conditions and, thus, have a better chance of thriving.

In addition to favoring native trees, there are many other considerations to think about when choosing the best tree species and best locations for the tree. For example, a key factor of success is to choose a native tree species that will grow at an appropriate speed, require an appropriate amount of

shade and have appropriately sized roots. It is also important to engage the community in choosing a location for trees that benefits the people and ensures that the tree can be easily cared for.

Other key factors for success include forming a group to champion the project and finding a member on the city council who supports the idea. A cohesive group, such as the citizens' group Tree City Pacifica, is important in order to work on the requirements and get the attention of the city. A supporter on the city council can be instrumental in pushing through barriers.

Some key factors for the success of CityTrees are its loyal and hardworking volunteers, its partnership with the Public Works Department and its relationships with other public entities, including staff from Redwood City, San Mateo County and public schools. CityTrees hosts pruning seminars, as well as events called "Prune and Pub" where volunteers prune trees that CityTrees had previously planted and then eat together afterward. These regular events ensure that trees receive needed attention in the years after planting.

Having a canopy goal — a goal to increase the tree canopy in the city — provides an incentive to maintain and replant trees instead of choosing cheaper options like cutting down trees and not replacing them.

### **Key Obstacles**

Establishing and maintaining a focus on trees requires a strong program to ensure continued support, funding and effort. Furthermore, trees themselves require a maintenance system or program to ensure the continued health of the tree and deal with any problems that arise (for example, issues with sidewalks and tree roots). It can be difficult to secure grants to help maintain trees as opposed to grants to help plant trees.

If a city does not have an existing heritage tree or tree care ordinance, then the process to become a Tree City USA takes longer.

Acquiring funding is a continual effort for most nonprofit organizations, especially in the beginning phases. CityTrees secures funding through various fundraising strategies including collecting donations, hosting fundraising events and maintaining a grant-writing program. Another obstacle tree planting organizations might face is developing and maintaining key relationships with public entities. CityTrees has found that understanding the needs of these entities is important and can be accomplished through ongoing communication.

### **Timeline to Implementation**

The timeline to becoming a Tree City USA will be different for each city depending on its existing programs, budgets and ordinances. For example, Pacifica, Calif., which has been a Tree City USA city for two years, already had a tree care ordinance and a community forestry program, so to become a Tree City USA, residents of Pacifica had to focus only on meeting the remaining two requirements: forming a Tree Board (which is typically a grassroots citizens' group) and developing an annual Arbor Day Celebration with an Arbor Day Proclamation. The process took about a year for Pacifica.

It took CityTrees about two years to form. From idea to official establishment, the process included enlisting support from community members, the mayor and the city arborist; forming a steering committee; creating a plan; and searching for funding.

### **References and Resources**

- Gail Benton Shoemaker, Co-founder of Tree City Pacifica, [gailbentshoe@igc.org](mailto:gailbentshoe@igc.org)
- Tom Cronin, CityTrees, [tom.cronin@sbcglobal.net](mailto:tom.cronin@sbcglobal.net)
- [Tree City USA](#)

- [U.S. Forest Service on Tree Species Considerations](#)
- [CityTrees](#)
- [CityTrees Prune & Pub Event](#)
- [City of San Mateo Street Tree Planting Program](#)
- Swartz, Angela. "[Nonprofit Fights Climate Change by Planting Trees at Local Schools.](#)" The Almanac, Dec. 4, 2019
- [Arboday.org](#)
- [Arboday.org Sample Tree Ordinance](#)
- [Arboday.org Sample Arbor Day Celebration Proclamation](#)
- [Arboday.org Fundamental Components Bulletin](#)
- "[How Trees Are Revolutionizing Cities Around the World.](#)" Connect4Climate, April 8 2019
- "[Examining the Viability of Planting Trees to Help Mitigate Climate Change.](#)" Alan Buis, November 7 2019
- "[30 Things You Should Know About Tree Planting](#)" Zoe Bommarito, 2019
- "[Are Tree Initiatives Really Helping the Planet?](#)" Tim Ozkurt, 2023
- "[Expand Tree Canopy Cover](#)" Alec LeSher, 2020

Document last updated January 2024