

PA Trees.org | The Pennsylvania Tree Resource Guide

Managing Community Forests

History of Trees in Communities

Records of intentional tree planting in cities extend back to 1400 BC in Egypt. In the 1500's, the first of several distinct landscape elements appeared in Italy, the garden allée which is a tree-lined pathway. A new type of allée, the wall promenade, was constructed in France and elsewhere late in the 16th century as military tactics changed. Double rows of trees were planted on ramparts that replaced masonry walls; thus public open space was created. In the 1700's street trees became commonplace in many European cities. Trees were thought to promote public health by purifying the air.



In America, settlers had to clear trees from the wilderness, but also valued their use for buildings, implements, and fuel. Their European experience was tempered with attitudes about freedom, independence from European domination, and beliefs in private property and free enterprise. So our public spaces developed differently, though with some European influences.

In Boston the first public planting of trees in 1646 was for the relief of travelers, and included the famous "Liberty Elm". Trees played a significant role in Pennsylvania's history. Even the state's name means Penn's Woods. William Penn in 1681 stated his Greene Countrie Towne "will never be burnt and always be wholesome", which predated European references to healthfulness.

In Philadelphia tree planting was ordained in 1700, and by 1750 the public became involved in planting city trees. In 1896 the city hired an arborist with the title of Chief Forester, perhaps the first urban forester, long before this term was conceived. Other American cities such as Washington, DC, Savannah, and Sacramento, also were planting trees in the 1700's. In 1857, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux employed the naturalistic, picturesque European style to design Central Park in New York City. They invented the name "landscape architect" to convey their intent to design, just as an architect designs buildings. They believed the parks would promote social progress and greater tolerance among diverse people.

Especially noteworthy is the empowerment of municipal tree commissions by states, starting with New Jersey in 1893. Tree commissions are reminiscent of Andrew Jackson Downing's Ornamental Tree Societies. What's significant is that tree commissions transfer advisory or operational responsibilities to citizen volunteers, which apparently is uniquely American.

Modern municipal tree management practices got underway in the 20th century. Early recommendations for inventoring and managing urban trees were made already in 1895, and inventory data became much more useful with the advent of computers in the last two decades. Yet accomplishments in the early 1900's were remarkable without sophisticated records. For example New York City in 1910 had a forester and about 600 workers to care for 150,000 street trees. Unfortunately, tree care declined in most cities during the middle of the last century.

Community Forestry in Pennsylvania



Starting a Community Tree Program

A survey conducted by Penn State University in 1991 estimated that only 28% of Pennsylvania boroughs and cities had a community tree program. Although this number has grown in the last few years, it illustrates that many Pennsylvania communities are overlooking a tremendous opportunity to develop and sustain a valuable community asset – their trees. The goal of any tree program should be to assure that a community's trees will receive proper care and replacement of trees that are removed. The presence of public trees is no guarantee that they will endure. For this reason, concerned citizens should work towards the establishment of a municipal shade tree commission or committee. Pennsylvania state enabling legislation provides for the formation of tree commissions and spells out the legal authority and responsibilities a municipality has related to trees within the public right-of-way and other public spaces such as parks.

By forming and empowering a tree commission or committee of dedicated volunteers with various backgrounds and talents, a community can develop a comprehensive long-term program that will perform the following functions:

- advise community leaders on tree related issues
- conduct a street tree inventory and develop a management plan
- reduce community liability by identifying and removing hazardous trees
- design tree plantings with species that minimize conflicts with utilities, sidewalks, signs and other infrastructure.
- settle community disputes, review tree removal requests and commercial planting plans
- solicit funds from various sources including grants and donations for tree plantings and maintenance
- develop street ordinances designed to protect trees from improper care and unwarranted removals
- inform, educate, and involve the public in community tree care

- foster cooperation between municipal departments, homeowners, utility companies, contractors, and developers

Who benefits from a community tree program? Every resident and visitor alike, but especially the children and grandchildren who will inherit a beautiful and healthy community that continues to attract residents and businesses. The key is making citizens and officials aware of the substantial benefits and cost reductions that a community tree program can accomplish by providing proper stewardship to an important community asset – its trees.

For more information about forming a tree commission, visit the following websites and contact a Penn State Extension Urban Forester or a DCNR Forester in your region.

Increasing Tree Canopy Cover in Pennsylvania Communities

Responding to an alarming trend of the loss of trees in Pennsylvania's metropolitan areas, TreeVitalize is a public-private partnership to help restore tree cover, educate citizens about planting trees as an act of caring for our environment, and build capacity among local governments to understand, protect and restore their urban trees.

Launched in 2004 in southeastern Pennsylvania, TreeVitalize already has achieved its goal of planting 20,000 trees in that five-county region. In spring 2008, TreeVitalize expanded to the Pittsburgh region; in fall 2008 and throughout 2009 it will be launched in metropolitan areas statewide.

Tree-lined streets make communities look great, and they also clean the air, provide shade to cool buildings and paved areas, increase property values and help control stormwater.

With its expansion statewide, TreeVitalize hopes to plant one million trees across the Commonwealth in the next five years.

We're counting on you!

Do You Live in a Tree City?

Making sure that our towns and cities have tree-lined streets and a community forestry program is a job for each of us – each mayor, each city council member, each civic leader, and each citizen. Without a community forestry program, a plan of action for ensuring that trees are cared for and replanted in our communities, future generations will inherit treeless, unhealthy and unlivable communities.

A National Arbor Day Foundation program called Tree City USA, recognizes US. towns and cities that develop comprehensive community forestry programs. Tree City USA began as a 1976 Bicentennial project co-sponsored by the National Association of State Foresters and the USDA-Forest Service. The National League of Cities and the U.S. Conference of Mayors are now co-sponsors as well.

To become a Tree City USA, a community must meet four standards: have a tree board or department; have a community tree ordinance; develop a comprehensive community forestry program with spending of \$2 per capita; and observe and proclaim Arbor Day. Following review and verification by the state forester's office, each Tree City USA community is awarded with a walnut plaque, a Tree City USA flag, and community road signs at their Arbor Day celebration the coming year.

- There are 3,310 communities that are currently a Tree City USA.
- There are 534 communities that received a Growth Award.
- Over 120 million people live in a Tree City USA.

Northeastern Pennsylvania Urban & Community Forestry Program

Since 1995, the program has supported more than 200 projects in communities throughout Northeastern Pennsylvania. These projects have brought diverse organizations together in a shared effort to support the long-term care and management of trees and natural resources in their communities.

Partnership building fostered through NEPA UCFP has helped to raise community awareness and participation in tree planting, tree care, stewardship, and educational activities throughout a thirteen-county region that encompasses three watersheds and supports more than a million residents. The program seeks to improve the ecological health of the region and to restore damaged ecosystems, to support economic improvements through natural resource planning, and to create pleasant places to live and work through sustainable community forestry programs.

Projects funded through the NEPA UCFP have involved more than 2,450 partners in planting, tree risk assessment, and restoration projects on degraded mine lands and parks, along highways, trails and river corridors, in downtown districts, neighborhoods, schools and at tourist attractions.

The program is sponsored through the USDA Forest Service, Northeastern Area, State and Private Forestry, and the Urban and Community Forestry Program. It is directed by the Pennsylvania Urban and Community Forestry Council in cooperation with the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources Bureau of Forestry and the Penn State Cooperative Extension.

For more information about the program call the office at (570) 945-8099 or visit the website [NEPA Urban & Community Forestry Program](#)

Northeast Pennsylvania Community Tree Association

A Community Tree Association is an organized group comprised of municipal tree commissions, beautification committees, private organizations, foresters, green industry representatives, and concerned individuals that have come together to share expertise and experience, collaborate on key issues, and provide a forum for discussion and education on the management and care of community trees.

Under the umbrella of Pennsylvania Community Forests, regional tree associations are building cooperative organizations for support and networking opportunities among its members.

Tree associations provide a regional voice to a statewide program with seats on the Board of Directors of Pennsylvania Community Forests. They are run by people who are actively involved in local community forestry programs, and are familiar with the many obstacles facing their programs. Members are empowered through networking, educational programs, and group discussion.

The Regional Community Tree Associations have amplified the outreach efforts of the program. Contact the Extension Urban Forester in your region for more information about tours, meetings, and other events.

Pennsylvania Community Forests has benefited tremendously from the addition of regional input and a grass roots approach to the statewide program.