

Urban Forests

An urban forest is collection of trees that live in an urban or suburban community. Urban forests include trees grown in large planters, landscape trees, parking lot trees, and patches of natural forest among others. An urban forest is also part of the green infrastructure of our community; it is every bit as important to the functioning of an urban or suburban system as the grey infrastructure of roads, pipes and wires. On this page you will learn more about trees and the urban forest.

A Brief History of the Forests of Fairfax County

Prior to 1492 the landscape was extensively managed by American Indians. The Indians used fire to maintain meadows and crop fields, to favor nut producing trees – oaks, hickories, walnuts and chestnuts – in the forest, and to herd game. Indian population declines after first contact led to the reforestation of abandoned agricultural land; a theme which has played out several times in Fairfax County.

From colonial times to the present Fairfax County has had at least 3 cash crops: tobacco, grain and dairy. Forests have shrunk and grown as land was cleared and then abandoned for these agricultural commodities. In 1945, Fairfax County was the leading dairy producer in Virginia, by 1965 most if the dairy and other agriculture had left the county. The pastures, hay fields and crop fields left behind reverted to forest, so that by 1972 about 71% of Fairfax County was covered by tree canopy. Canopy coverage has decreased to about 41% today and most of our forests are less than 60 years old.

Trees in Fairfax County Today

In recent years the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors has made trees a central part of their environmental program. In 2007 the board adopted two major policies regarding trees:

The Tree Action Plan

<http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dpwes/environmental/treeactionplan.pdf> is a 20 year strategic plan to conserve and manage Fairfax County's urban forest.

The Urban Tree Canopy Goal

<http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dpwes/environmental/30year.htm> is a commitment by Fairfax County to achieve 45% canopy coverage by 2037

Both of these policies support broader environmental goals of improved air and water quality, reduced climate change, and improved quality of life. FCRP supports the county in its commitment to increasing and improving the urban forest.

Tree Benefits

Most people are aware that through photosynthesis trees release oxygen and sequester carbon. Trees also clean the air, protect our streams, manage stormwater, provide wildlife habitat and are generally important cogs in earth's life support machinery. Trees

can lower summer temperature and raise winter temperatures and strategically planted trees can reduce a buildings energy consumption (and cost) by 20%. Trees make us feel better, help us heal faster, sooth ADHD, and calm traffic. Trees are good for the bottom line; consumers spend more time and money in well planted commercial areas; a good shade tree can add 10% to the value of a home.

Here are some links to the benefits of trees:

http://www.treesaregood.com/treecare/tree_benefits.aspx

<http://www.arborday.org/trees/benefits.cfm>

<http://www.caseytrees.org/planting/reasons/tree-benefits/index.php>

<http://www.epa.gov/hiri/mitigation/trees.htm>

<http://www.fs.fed.us/ucf/treesforpeople.html>

To find out what your tree is doing for you and your community visit:

<http://treebenefits.com/calculator/>

Tree Ownership

The mantra of urban forestry is “The Right Tree in the Right Place.” This means matching the tree to the space allowed for it, so there is room above ground for the stems and branches and room below ground for the roots. The tree should also meet your objectives. The great thing about trees is that they are true multi-taskers – a tree planted for beauty will also sequester carbon, shade the house, clean the air, and reduce runoff.

Some people think tree ownership is difficult, costly, and hard work. The truth is that nature wants to grow trees here in Fairfax County, once a tree is established in a good environment, the best thing to do is get out of the way and let the fertile soils and adequate rain of Fairfax take care of the tree.

A good place to start with tree ownership is the US Forest Service’s Tree Owners Manual. http://na.fs.fed.us/pubs/uf/tom/090202_tom_hr.pdf The forest service also has a booklet on how to prune trees.

http://www.na.fs.fed.us/spfo/pubs/howtos/ht_prune/prun001.htm These are pdf format publications.

Another good source of information on tree care and ownership is

<http://www.treesaregood.com/treecare/treecareinfo.aspx> run by the International Association of Arborists.

The Virginia Department of Forestry also has information about tree care at

<http://www.dof.virginia.gov/mgt/trees-101.htm>

Trees and Turf The biggest issue that most people have with taking care of their trees is taking care of their turf. Trees and turf don’t get along and what’s good for one maybe bad for the other. Leaves are an example. Trees would prefer to allow leaves to pile up on the ground under them, but grass is not happy about it; the solution is to grind the

leaves up with your lawn mower and let them lay. Grinding the leaves helps them settle quickly between the grass blades; letting them lay helps build the soil and return nutrients to your plant roots. http://www.treesaregood.com/treecare/trees_turf.aspx

For information about trees that is specific to Fairfax County visit <http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dpwes/environmental/trees.htm>

Conservation Landscaping

Conservation landscaping goes by many names but all have the same goal – to share your space with the rest of the planet and reduce the negative effects of your space. This means managing your stormwater so it doesn't create erosion and sedimentation down stream. It also means using native plants to reestablish or enhance the food web on your property. Some resources:

<http://www.chesapeakelandscape.org/Guid1207%20.pdf>

<http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/nvswcd/>

<http://www.dof.virginia.gov/mgt/rfb/rain-gardens.htm>

An excellent resource for selecting native plants is

<http://www.nps.gov/plants/pubs/chesapeake/>