

Urban Forests – They’re Not Just for the Big City

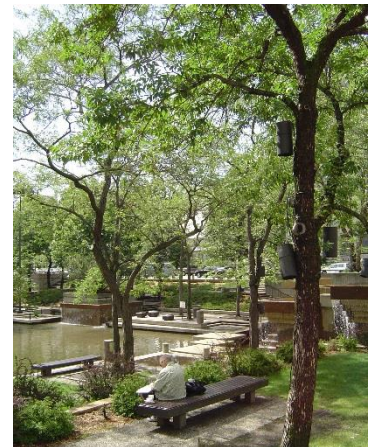
By: Eric Wiseman, Virginia Tech

As forest landowners, most of us have a fairly clear vision of what a forest looks like and what benefits it provides. However, it’s easy for us to overlook the forest that is directly over our heads on a daily basis – the urban forest. When you hear the term “urban forest,” you probably conjure images of downtown Richmond, bustling with people, traffic, and buildings. But in reality, an urban forest exists in every locality where people congregate. The urban forest in a small town might not be as expansive or intensively managed as the urban forest in a big city. But those trees in the small town are just as important to rural denizens as their brethren in the big city.

When you live in a smaller community surrounded by lush rural forests, it’s easy to say “We have plenty of trees”. While that may be true to a certain extent, it’s important to keep in mind that getting trees into the town amongst buildings, parking lots, and sidewalks is also important to the comfort, amenity, and sustainability of the town. The reasons for getting trees into built environments are numerous and not unlike those reasons that we cherish forest on the back forty.

Among the most important of these urban forest benefits are keeping our water clean, our air pure, and our homes cool. One of the biggest challenges that any locality faces is dealing with stormwater runoff. As an area develops, impervious surfaces such as asphalt and rooftops displace vegetated land cover. When it rains, water gets channeled off of these impervious surfaces often directly into our streams and rivers. This can be a problem not only in terms of water quantity, but also water quality. When we plant trees where their crowns will overhang impervious surfaces, we can take advantage of the trees’ natural ability to intercept rainfall with their canopies and gently channel it down to their root zones, recharging aquifers and cleansing out sediment and pollutants.

Trees are also really good at scrubbing pollutants out of the air. In towns, there are all sorts of activities that kick up dust and emit nasty pollutants like carbon monoxide and ozone, making it hard for folks with asthma or COPD to breathe. Having trees planted around factories, construction sites, and parking lots where these pollutants originate helps keep the air clean and make breathing easier.



Urban forests bring nature into the built environment, helping create sustainable and viable communities.

Photo by: Eric Wiseman, Virginia Tech.

And finally, trees keep our towns cool. We all know that under a shade tree is the place to be on a summer day. Just imagine magnifying that effect hundreds of times throughout the community by planting trees. When we do that, we're helping to cut down on the urban heat island effect – the elevated temperatures that we experience when there is a build-up of heat-absorbing pavement and roof tiles. When a community gets hot, we have to run air conditioners more, which is not good for our pocketbook or the environment. Planting trees where they'll shade pavement and the west sides of buildings is the best way to help beat the urban heat island. Of course, urban forests provide many benefits beyond what we've discussed here, but these are some of the most important ones.

All of this talk about planting trees around homes and offices might seem a bit daunting. Indeed, you have to make good choices about what trees to plant, where to plant them, and how to plant them or you might end up with more problems than benefits. Fortunately, here in Virginia we have an organization whose mission is to help citizens in all localities plan, plant, and maintain their urban forests. Trees Virginia, also known as the Virginia Urban Forest Council, was formed as a non-profit in the early 1990s, bringing together folks from diverse backgrounds with passion and expertise about trees and urban forests. The 20 member council assists Virginia Department of Forestry's Urban and Community Forestry program with its education and outreach efforts.



Trees Virginia is very excited about its recently redesigned website, <http://treesvirginia.org>. The website is an excellent resource to help people stay informed about Trees Virginia's core program areas – community outreach and community education. Community outreach includes regional workshops that are periodically hosted by Trees Virginia along with their support for local civic groups such as the Tree Stewards. They also support a student intern for the Virginia Big Tree Program and use

workshop proceeds to fund scholarships for university and community college students. In the events section of the website, you can browse the upcoming educational events supported by Trees Virginia and even use their online registration system to sign up for a workshop in your area. Perhaps the best thing about the Trees Virginia website is their collection of education resources. Here you will find timely, practical information about planting and maintaining trees in your community.

The next time you drive down Main Street in your community, take a moment to look around and appreciate the hard-working trees that line your streets and reside in your parks. If you see some places where trees could be put to work, get in touch with your

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community leaders, roll up your sleeves, and plant a tree. It'll make your community a bit cleaner, greener, and leave a lasting impression for generations to come.

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