

Penn State **Extension**

FROM THE WOODS

Community Forests



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Cooperative Extension
College of Agricultural Sciences

AN EDUCATIONAL SERIES ABOUT FORESTRY FOR YOUTH

Community forests are made up of the trees, plants, wildlife, and water found in communities (places where people live, work, and play together). Community forests are located in and around towns and cities. They surround streets, buildings, parks, sidewalks, and parking lots. But, are community forests really forests?

TWO TYPES OF FORESTS

To most people, the word “forest” usually means a remote, wild area. Let’s call these “rural forests.” Most originate on their own from tree seeds and sprouts, but some rural forests are planted by people too. While rural for-



Trees make communities beautiful. These historical postcards show the pride people took in their community forests in the early 1900s.

ests are home to many species of animals and plants, people are also part of these forests. People enjoy rural forests in many ways, such as for biking, walking, or camping. People also use things from rural forests. Wood, water, wildlife, and edible and medicinal plants are examples of these things.

So how do community and rural forests compare? In many ways they are similar, in some ways they are different, but they are both forests. Com-



munity forests have most of the same parts as rural forests, such as trees and wildlife. But, community forests have more people and built structures

such as roads and buildings. Additionally, the origins of the plants and animals can differ between these two forests. The kinds of trees in rural forests are usually native to the local areas where they grow, while trees in community forests are often a mixture of both native and foreign or “exotic” species. The same is also true for animals. Many animal species from faraway lands make their homes in community forests. Norway rats, European starlings, and even domestic cats are a few examples of these. Now let’s look at why community forests are special and how we benefit from them.

Community forests don’t just happen—they require planning, design, and lots of hard work. They also take time to grow and become what people hope them to be.



GREEN BEAUTY AND OTHER BENEFITS

Since most Americans grow up in towns and cities, community forests provide their first connection to the natural world. The most noticeable part of these forests is the trees. For centuries, people in towns and cities have planted trees for many reasons. Trees provide numerous benefits to people and communities. Some of these benefits are easy to understand, while others are not easy to see or measure.

High on the list of benefits is natural beauty or “aesthetics.” The beauty of trees is known to give people inspiration, relieve stress, and improve mental and physical health. Just looking at trees can help people feel better. The forms, colors, textures, aromas, and movements of trees all play a part in why people find trees so beautiful in communities. In combination with the beauty of trees, community forests provide numerous environmental benefits that directly improve the quality of people’s lives.

Trees greatly improve the living conditions in communities. They make the environment more comfortable, healthy, and stable. For example, trees in community forests produce oxygen that people and animals need to breathe. They improve air quality by absorbing air pollutants. They lower summer temperatures by providing shade. They slow winter winds. They reduce stormwater runoff. They muffle noise levels. They protect soil by



Tree planting in community forests is often done by local volunteers. Care should be given to plant the proper tree in the right spot, at the right time of year, and using the correct method. Newly planted trees need follow-up care and watering to get off to a good start.

controlling erosion. Some of these benefits also have bonus effects. For example, by keeping buildings cooler in the summer (through shade and moisture) and warmer in the winter (by blocking winter winds), trees help reduce the need to burn fuels for cooling and heating. This reduces air pollution, eliminates waste, and saves energy.

HIGHER VALUES

People also benefit from community forests in other ways. The beauty and better living conditions they pro-

vide can increase the value of land and buildings. Beautiful community forests attract more residents and businesses to an area. In turn, increased property values mean higher income from taxes for towns and cities. These help develop and maintain public places. Community forests are known to attract more visitors and shoppers, enhance privacy, reduce crime, and improve recreation for children and adults. Lastly, community forests can increase local pride and people’s civic involvement. People often enjoy planting and caring

for the trees and gardens near their homes.

While it’s hard to believe that community forests can do so much, it’s important to understand that they need care and attention. Let’s look at these needs more closely.

KEEPING THEM SAFE AND BEAUTIFUL

Community forests require lots of care and study by people. This topic is called “community forestry” or “urban forestry.” To maintain safe and healthy community forests, people must prune and care for the existing trees. Falling tree limbs can be dangerous and destructive. Dead or weak trees can be unsafe and need to be removed. Tree planting is also a big part of keeping community forests beautiful. Choosing which tree to plant and where, when, and how to plant it are all part of the work to be

The wild animals in community forests are adjusted to living around people. They can be fun to observe, but they can cause problems too.



done. For example, planting tall-growing trees (like red oaks) under a power line is never wise. Shorter-growing trees (like redbuds) work best in these locations. Further, some trees (like sugar maples) cannot tolerate road salt (it burns their roots) and need to be planted back from roads and highways. Wildlife (like deer) may also need to be controlled in towns and cities. Bird droppings or wildlife damage to plants and structures are just a few of the issues that may need attention in community forests.

Community forests are a part of our lives, and people play an important part in their care. Commu-



Pruning and removing dead or diseased branches and trees is skilled and dangerous work that requires lots of time in the air.

nity forests are useful and unique. They do not happen without thoughtful planning and effort. There is much

to learn and discover about community forests, and our lives are richer because they exist. Learn more about your

community's forest and who is caring for it. Get involved in making your community forest more beautiful.



Many young people become interested in community and urban forestry careers while working as volunteers. Earning a college degree in community forestry is the first step in starting a rewarding career.

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