

Urban Trees and Private Property



from the **TREE CITY USA®**
BULLETIN

The benefits of trees have been well-documented and are widely known. But to maximize these benefits, trees in residential yards and elsewhere on private property must be considered if management strategies are to achieve their optimal effectiveness for the community.



Louisville Grows' Urban Forestry program includes training and work for refugees as well as expanding the city's tree canopy with both right-of-way planting and more trees on private property. The nonprofit is based in Louisville, Kentucky.

There are an estimated 5.5 billion trees in the urban forests of the United States, providing a multitude of benefits to the 81 percent of Americans who live in urbanized areas. However, only about 20 percent of those trees are on public land such as parks or on rights-of-way where planting strips are commonly used for street trees. Together, urban trees are said to provide a value of more than \$2.4 trillion in environmental services and other benefits.

Many legal and economic scholars state that the benefits of urban trees can be considered a "public good." However, if 80–85 percent of the producers of this public good are on private property, it is easy to see a politically charged dilemma. Since the days of James Madison, arguments have been made for sanctity

of property rights, so where does urban forestry stand in the collision of the two concepts — property rights and a public good? (You can find a link to a brilliant discussion of this written by Dr. Shannon Watkins at arborday.org/bulletins.)

Clearly, planting and management of trees on the private portions of a community have great potential for increasing the amount and diversity of the city's tree canopy and helping to ensure other healthful conditions of the urban forest as a whole. In this bulletin, we showcase several ways that cities throughout the country are working to respect private property rights while at the same time making a positive impact on what happens to the trees on privately held parcels.



"Trees, whether on public or private property, contribute to the livability of the city. Protecting green infrastructure is as important as maintaining roads, bridges, and airports."

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