BY CHRISTINA MCLAUGHLIN

If you’ve enjoyed a shaded sidewalk while walking your dog, noticed the leaves change colors on a village street, or picnicked in a town park, you’ve benefited from urban forestry. The word “urban” may make you think of large cities, but the urban forest doesn’t just refer to city trees. Urban forests are anywhere there are built environments—cities, towns, and villages—and stretch across suburbia. This includes street trees, town and city park trees, trees in municipal rights-of-way, and neighborhood trees in your front yard. Our urban forests feature trees where people work, live, and play.

We don’t often think about the benefits trees provide. But trees are superheroes, capable of tackling some of the biggest problems we face in exchange for a little space, water, and care. Adding trees to our cities, towns, and villages has been shown to:

• Improve public health—both physically and emotionally. Trees clean our air and water, leading to healthier people, and being in a treed environment reduces stress.
• Capture stormwater runoff and reduce flooding.
• Reduce energy usage in buildings in the summer by providing shade, and reduce energy use in the winter by blocking cold winds.
• Moderate city temperatures, helping counter the heat captured by buildings and streets.
• Absorb carbon dioxide and store carbon, helping mitigate climate change.

Urban trees can have a tough life, though, which is why we need to protect and manage them. Urban Forestry is the practice of caring for trees in built environments. In addition to suffering from storms, insect and pest damage, drought, and the effects of aging, like their forest siblings,
Urban forests are anywhere there are built environments, such as cities, towns, villages, and suburbia. Here, a tree provides a peaceful, shady spot for a visitor outside the NYS Capitol Building in Albany.
urban trees also contend with snow plows, road salt, car accidents, limited root space, utility work, and soil compaction from pedestrians, cars, and sidewalks.

The invasive emerald ash borer has swept across the state, and dead ash trees now line some roads and neighborhoods. As trees are removed for a variety of reasons, they may not be replaced, leading to a decline in the urban tree canopy. A Nature Conservancy study found that four million urban trees are lost each year in the U.S. New York is losing 6,720 acres a year of canopy coverage in urban settings, which has caused a loss of $1 billion worth of ecosystem benefits like carbon capture, water filtration, stormwater management, and air filtration.

With all the benefits trees provide, planting more is an obvious choice, and it’s happening right now. The MillionTreesNYC initiative successfully planted one million trees across the city. The Arbor Day Foundation’s new Time for Trees Initiative aims to plant 100 million trees around the globe and inspire 5 million people to continue planting by the 150th anniversary of Arbor Day in 2022. Planting trees is usually part of Arbor Day celebrations in towns and villages around the state, and hosting a tree planting event at any time can be a great volunteer opportunity for your community and a way to increase awareness and gain support for neighborhood trees.

Urban forestry is about a lot more than just planting. Healthy trees need maintenance and care throughout their life, such as periodic pruning and possible care after storm events. Managing the urban forest can be a challenge for cities and towns, which is where DEC’s Urban and Community Forestry (UCF) program can help. The UCF program offers grants to municipalities to grow and maintain their urban forestry programs, and also provides training and workshops across the state for municipal employees and tree care professionals. There are several ways to help your community trees (see callout box), and we encourage you to get involved.

The next time you hear the phrase “urban forestry,” remember that urban trees are trees for you and me! We may take that for granted at times, so take a minute to look around at the trees in your neighborhood and those you pass on your way to work or school, and try not to smile. It won’t be easy.

Christina McLaughlin is the Urban & Community Forestry Volunteer Coordinator in DEC’s Division of Lands and Forests.

You Can Help

If you love the trees in your neighborhood, here are ways you can get involved in urban forestry:

- Encourage your town, village, or city to become a Tree City, which will help protect and expand the number of public trees in your community. www.arborday.org/programs/treecityusa/index-become.cfm.
- Join your municipality’s tree board, or help them start one.
- Join the NYS Urban Forestry Council, the advisory board for DEC’s UCF program, and partner in urban forestry around the state http://nysufc.org/.
- Encourage your child’s school to become a Tree Campus K-12 with the Arbor Day Foundation and to participate in the annual 5th Grade Arbor Day Poster Contest. www.dec.ny.gov/education/25420.html.
- Sign up for the DEC Delivers topic “Forest Plants and Land Conservation” to learn more about the trees you see. https://public.govdelivery.com/accounts/NYSDEC/subscriber/new?topic_id=NYSDEC_22.
- Join your local ReLeaf Committee or attend a workshop. ReLeaf is a statewide network of committees that brings together urban forestry professionals, municipal staff, and interested members of the public to provide training, support, and resources to communities. Watch the UCF activity page for events and meetings near you. Also consider joining us at the annual ReLeaf Conference! The 2020 Conference is July 23-25 in Buffalo, NY. www.dec.ny.gov/lands/30859.html.