Community Forestry: *Another Way of Thinking about Forest Management*

Mississippians are fortunate to live in an incredibly diverse state. We can see the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains in the northeast part of the state one day, drive through the soybean and cotton fields of the Delta the next, explore the piney woods of central Mississippi a third day, and visit beaches and bayous on the fourth day. We have turquoise lakes, spooky cypress swamps, and meandering rivers. Mississippians live and work in communities, small towns, suburbs, and cities.

Growing across this impressive landscape are trees. Mississippi's climate and soils provide just the things trees need to prosper. Some Mississippians may wonder why taking care of our trees is important; lots of people think trees just sort of take care of themselves. But as our urban areas expand, it becomes more and more important to manage existing trees and plant new ones.

Although you might not realize it, everyone in Mississippi lives in the forest: the community forest. Community forests consist of both planted trees and remnants of the native forest before urban development. Community forests include the trees in all these places and more:

- urban parks
- wetlands
- woodlands
- roadsides
- yards
- vacant lots
- riversides
- coastlines
- cities
- suburbs
- small towns
- farmland

In short, these forests help create dynamic ecosystems and make communities fit to live in.

Community forests are relatively low-cost investments with high returns. They improve air and water quality, reduce carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, conserve energy, reduce storm water runoff, reduce soil erosion, create wildlife habitat, increase property resale and rental values, hold up tire swings, provide shade for summer picnics, and improve social connections.

Community forests are improved when trees fit the location in which they are planted, when they are planted properly, and when they are cared for long term. People who work in community forestry include arborists, urban foresters, landscape architects, landscapers, planners, nursery owners, and others.

Some cities have a certified arborist on staff who directs the management of trees in parks, in cemeteries, and along city streets. These professionals know all about caring for trees:

- where and how to plant them properly;
- when and how much fertilizer to use, and how to apply it;
- how to recognize potential hazards;
- how to prune trees to accomplish various objectives; and
- how to diagnose and treat tree pathogens, diseases, and health issues.

In addition to promoting sound arboriculture practices, community forestry workers teach residents about ecosystem restoration and management. As residents work together to improve the community forest and the ecosystems it supports, they strengthen social networks. These social networks further improve the sense of community in the area.

A healthy community forest starts with local volunteers. Municipal tree programs often have limited funding and staffing, so volunteers are critical to the success of a project. Residents contribute meaningfully to their communities, and the forest benefits from their contributions.

Community forestry is practiced by

- local governments
- non-profit and civic organizations
- neighborhood associations
- community groups
- educational institutions.

Resident-led community forestry efforts have been successful all over Mississippi. All of the following projects in Mississippi have benefited community forests:

- citizens have restored streams and wetland habitat by volunteering with conservation organizations
- residents planted trees in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina
- non-profit organizations worked to protect the Chunky River
- Master Urban Foresters teach youth about urban green space.

Many educational programs and projects have also been successful in the state:

- tree inventory training
- tree care and maintenance instruction
- watershed education
- volunteerism and leadership training
- conservation planning
- ecosystem restoration outreach
- municipal tree ordinance planning
- benefits of urban trees calculations.

Participants in community forestry projects learn by doing. Instead of hearing lectures, those who participate in community forestry projects learn conservation practices by actually practicing conservation. Residents practice thinking on their feet and solving conservation problems.

This hands-on way of learning impacts not only the individual but also the entire human and natural community. Community forestry projects nurture dialogue about broader issues in the area, including youth development, environmental hazards, and leadership. Residents identify local resources and assets and develop a sense of place as they work toward a common goal.

Community forestry projects are driven by education and action. Community foresters help residents identify problems, create solutions, and set goals. Professionals also teach residents biological and social assessment techniques. These might include collecting data from the United States Census, conducting water quality tests, or inventorying the urban forest canopy. As Kim Coder (1996) observed, "examination of community, cultural, and social trends is critical for successfully running a community natural resources management program." As a result of collecting this data, residents build on existing organizational, leadership, and knowledge capacities.

Finally, professionals train participants in relevant silviculture, arboriculture, or wildlife management practices. Although these practices can be used in a number of ways, they are often used in watershed management, forest products development, climate change adaptations, or ecosystem function enhancement. The training should always incorporate local knowledge and experiences.

Although the concept of community forestry is not new, it offers a fresh way of thinking about natural resources management based on the view that community is a dynamic field of local social interactions (Wilkinson 1991). Social interactions enable residents to share common interests and pursue collective action, from which community emerges (Luloff and Swanson 1995).

MSU Extension is available to contribute research expertise, leadership, and technical instruction to support community forestry processes. For more information, please contact your local county Extension office.

References

Coder, K.D. 1996. "Concepts of Change: Futuring Community Forestry." Forest Resources Publication FOR96-26. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service.

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By **Brady Self,** PhD, Associate Extension Professor, Forestry.

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