

Alabama's 'Tree City USA' Program:



Strengthening Our Community Forests

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Trees grow all around us, hiding in plain sight, and providing numerous benefits often taken for granted. In addition to their beauty, trees clean our air, clean our water, reduce erosion, and make our wallets fatter from increased property values and reduced energy costs. Trees are the silent sentinels of our society, and proper management of this resource is vital to the health and longevity of our communities.

Community participation in a program such as 'Tree City USA' is important because like all high value assets, if not properly maintained, trees can be a potential hazard. In order to optimize their benefits, trees are planted near homes, businesses, roads, and sidewalks — places where structural failure of a tree could cause property damage or injury. These risks can be mitigated by proper management; but as long as there is a target below a suspended weight, there is an inherent level of risk. Weighing the benefits of trees against risk is one of the critical decisions faced in community forestry. This is a difficult balancing act, so municipalities need to seek professional guidance, carefully design their landscapes, and adhere to a long-term,

comprehensive tree plan. By doing the things necessary for Tree City USA recognition, your community will be better prepared to handle these risks.

Tree City USA is a free program available to Alabama communities wanting to properly care for their trees. This national recognition program is administered by the Arbor Day Foundation, and provides municipalities with the framework to achieve a basic level of urban forest management. Participation in the program is free, and once the necessary information is gathered, filling out the online application typically takes under an hour. Communities recognized as a Tree City USA receive street signs and a flag to proudly display their commitment to proper tree care. The municipality is also listed on the Arbor Day Foundation website and sent information about upcoming grant opportunities, potential pest and disease concerns, and educational events. The city or community is also networked with the Alabama Forestry Commission's Urban & Community Forestry (U&CF) program, where they have easy access to professional arborists and instruction on proper tree care. Community partici-

pation in the program also helps the State of Alabama, as enrollment numbers are used by the federal government to allocate funds.

If your community is not a Tree City USA, begin the certification process by asking a city official to contact the Alabama Forestry Commission's U&CF program. Contact information for the U&CF group is shown at the end of this article. Becoming a Tree City USA is simple; your community only needs to complete an annual application, and satisfy the following four requirements:

1. A tree board or department that meets at least once per year and is responsible for public trees;
2. A Tree Care ordinance;
3. At least \$2 per capita spent managing the community forest during the current year;
4. An annual Arbor Day proclamation and observance.

A 'tree board' or department is a group of citizens or a municipal department charged with caring for the community's trees. The tree board can be set up many ways, and it is up to the community to decide what will work best for them.

The next requirement is having a tree care ordinance. This standard may take the longest to complete the first time, because new ordinances often require approval by the city council or a similar governing authority. However, after the first year in the program, your community can satisfy the requirement by checking a box on the application to verify the ordinance is unchanged and still in effect. The ordinance can and should be tailored to the individual community, and there are many great examples available from the Alabama Forestry Commission's U&CF program or from other online sources. To meet the requirement, the ordinance must establish a tree board or department and lay out general provisions for community tree care.



The third requirement is spending at least \$2 per capita on community trees during the application year. The budget standard may seem daunting, but it is rarely a constraint. Many common expenditures can be counted as part of the \$2 per capita budget including: volunteer hours, salaries of tree care workers, utility line clearance, the purchase of tree related materials, etc.

Finally, the fourth standard is an annual celebration of Arbor Day with a proclamation. The celebration can be a parade, a tree planting, a student reading the proclamation to the city council, or anything in between as long as it celebrates Arbor Day and



can be documented with a picture, newspaper article, or event agenda on the application. As for the yearly proclamation, it is extremely flexible but must mention Arbor Day and the value of trees. Additionally, the proclamation must be current and dated for the same year as the submitted application.

Example ordinances, budgets, and proclamations are all available from the Alabama Forestry Commission or online at the Tree City USA website: www.arborday.org/programs/treecityusa/.

For communities wanting to go the extra mile, they can apply for a Tree City USA Growth Award. To be eligible for a Growth Award, the community must have earned a Tree City USA designation for the previous two consecutive years, and conducted tree-related activities which go above and beyond the core standards of the program. On the Growth Award application, the Arbor Day Foundation provides ideas and examples of eligible activities to help municipalities take the next step in establishing a progressive tree management program.

In 2016 (the most current award year as of this writing), 82 communities in Alabama were recognized as a Tree City USA and four of these received Growth Awards. The program is designed to fit any size municipality, and participating communities range from Myrtlewood with a population of 130, to Birmingham with a population of 212,461. The Tree City USA program celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2016, and several Alabama communities have been involved in the program for over 30 years, including Mobile which has been recognized for 38 years.

To find out if your community is already a Tree City USA, or for more information about the program, please visit www.arborday.org/programs/treecityusa/ or contact the Alabama Forestry Commission's Urban & Community Forestry program by emailing or calling Dale.Dickens@forestry.alabama.gov, (334) 240-9360; or Will.Liner@forestry.alabama.gov, (334) 240-9306.

Tree City USA applications for 2017 become available September 1. Help your community receive the recognition it deserves for being a good steward of its urban forest, become a Tree City USA today!🌳

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TREE CITY USA®

BY THE NUMBERS

82

Tree City USA communities



38.45% of AL lives in a Tree City USA community

100%

Recertification Rate

Largest

Birmingham

POPULATION 212,437

Smallest

Myrtlewood

POPULATION 120



Alabama's longest-running active Tree City USA community:

Mobile

38 YEARS

\$17,586,821.90
spent on urban forestry management



\$9.41

average per capita

Growth Award

4

Growth Award recipients

Longest Active Growth Award

Foley · 20 years

Beyond Tree City USA

84.1% of communities completed online applications

13 Alabama Tree Campus Schools

0 New Tree Campus Schools

1 Tree Line Utility

Longest Running Tree Line USA Utility:

Alabama Power (16 years)

