



Community Forest Stewardship Principles

By Jason Gordon, *University of Georgia*

Community forests comprise trees found in urban and suburban landscapes as well as small rural towns and utility service corridors. Community forests include public and private trees, but they are more than just trees; they are an integrated community of plants, animals, soils, and water. As a resident of your community, you are more than just a homeowner, you are also a steward who pursues personal goals by caring for and using the forest today while sustaining long-term community forest health and continuity.

This publication will help Georgia residents and their communities consider three basic questions:

1. How might you become engaged in managing a healthy community forest over the long term?
2. How do you as a forest steward set priorities?
3. How might you recognize on-the-ground results of good stewardship?

Your personal objectives for your yard as well as use of public spaces are key to answering these questions, and the stewardship principles presented here are a template for addressing your objectives and priorities in a sustainable way. If you think about your community landscape in terms of these principles, you can capture the full benefit of blending personal goals, community goals, and stewardship principles. Such an approach is a blueprint for action and targets change as your personal and community trees improve and thrive.

PRINCIPLE 1

MAINTAIN OR IMPROVE PLANT, ANIMAL, AND TREE DIVERSITY IN THE COMMUNITY FOREST AND LANDSCAPE

- The community forest includes both trees, water bodies, and other plant life such as shrubs and groundcover. The community forest is also a habitat for native wildlife, songbirds, insects, and microscopic organisms.
- The forest, above and below the soil, is a community of plants and animals that is part of a broader mix of communities across the surrounding landscape (or watershed), like a patch in a quilt. One of the biggest problems in many community forests is monocultures – planting the same species across the landscape. Your measures of success include responding to ecological change, maintaining habitat for wildlife, and monitoring management activities to maintain and enhance diverse plants, animals, and trees.

PRINCIPLE 2

MAINTAIN OR IMPROVE COMMUNITY ECOSYSTEM BENEFITS

- The community forest provides benefits in the form of many nonmarket values (e.g., energy savings, air and water pollution removal, conserved habitat, recreation, carbon storage and sequestration, and storm water mitigation) and market values in terms of increased property prices and influencing consumer behavior. In some places, city trees are being used in high-value wood products and bioenergy production.
- On a broader scale, your community forest's productivity contributes to the local potential to attract and sustain economic investment and community development. Measures of success include maintaining the overall long-term vigor of your landscape trees, planting the right trees in the right place, and improving wildlife habitat and water quality.





Becoming a Good Steward

Community forest stewardship is an ongoing, long-term, and adaptive process; you will learn from your actions, investments, and even inaction as each decision is manifest on the land. Progress, however, can be complex since variables such as climate, soils, and the interaction among its trees, plants, and animals govern tree health and vigor. These, among other factors, often make progress subtle, intermittent, and difficult to gauge. Taking the time to consider what efforts, events, milestones, or accomplishments you might use to track your trees' success can help focus your work and avoid surprises, as well as maximize satisfaction and returns on your investment.

PRINCIPLE 3

MAINTAIN OR IMPROVE THE HEALTH AND VIGOR OF THE COMMUNITY FOREST AND ITS LANDSCAPE/WATERSHED

- The life cycles of your neighborhood's plants and animals ebb and flow with age and climate, and may be affected by natural events such as storms, insect invasions, wildfire, and drought. By affecting the community forest, these same events also impact adjacent lands and watersheds.
- The community forest's potential to influence, and be influenced by, the health and vigor of its surrounding landscape varies with its history and general condition, e.g., mix of tree species and forest ages. Reducing invasive plant species, managing tree species mix, and ensuring long-term ecosystem health are signs of success.

PRINCIPLE 4

IMPROVE SOIL AND WATER RESOURCES

- Your trees play an important role in the fertility of the community's soils, as well as in the health and vigor of the plants and animals that rely on that soil.
- The community forest's role as a filter—catching waterborne sediment, softening the impact of storm-driven rain, and holding stormwater for gentle release over time—serves critical needs on both your own and your neighbors' properties within the local watershed.

Taking time to learn about soil, including nutrition and volumes, and factoring this into overall management of trees, developing riparian areas, and developing vegetation ordinances are signs of success.



SUMMARY

Community forest stewardship is as challenging as it is rewarding. Like most other worthy undertakings, you measure successful stewardship both as steps along the journey as well as in reaching your personal goals. It is a commitment to paying at least as much attention to the what's under the trees as is paid to the trees themselves. It is discovering that forests respond to the science and practice used in their stewardship. It is rewarding for all the above, as well as for the pleasure of working and enjoying time under your trees.

To learn more about community forest stewardship, see the Georgia Forestry Commission Sustainable Community Forestry web site

<https://gfccommunityforestry.wordpress.com/>

Or contact one of the following organizations.

UGA Forestry Outreach
Warnell School of Forestry
and Natural Resources
180 East Green St.,
Athens, GA 30602
706-542-1011 or

www.warnell.uga.edu/outreach

Georgia Forestry Commission
5645 Riggins Mill Road,
Dry Branch, GA 31020
478-751-3500 or

www.gfc.ga.gov

Georgia Tree Council
P.O. Box 2199,
Stone Mountain, GA 30086
470-210-5900 or

gatreecouncil.org

PRINCIPLE 5

MANAGE FORESTS FOR GROWTH AND ENERGY STORAGE

- Our reliance on fossil-based fuels releases carbon into the atmosphere. The community forest can counter these impacts as trees use carbon for growth and energy storage. Community trees are well-suited for this because they may be left to grow to maturity, storing carbon as they age. All forest plants and soils store carbon, so your management influences the natural cycles of storage in both living and dead plant material.
- Some trees (e.g., oak and hickory) store carbon longer than others (e.g., birch). Signs of success include planting optimal species and taking carbon release into account when removing trees.

PRINCIPLE 6

MANAGE FOR COMMUNITY, CULTURAL, AND ECONOMIC BENEFITS

- Your personal landscaping goals should take into consideration your trees' contribution to your community's economy and quality of life. Measures of success are considering your community's value of aesthetics when implementing your yardscape practices and, when feasible, becoming involved with the local tree board.

PRINCIPLE 7

COMPLY WITH LAWS AND BEST MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

- Good tree management and tree health care is subject to local ordinances designed to serve your community. A measure of success is following best management practices, such as planting the right tree in the right place, which are key to optimal tree health.

The University of Georgia Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources offers educational programs, assistance, and materials to all people without regard to race, color, national origin, age, gender, or disability.

The University of Georgia is committed to principles of equal opportunity and affirmative action.