How to Work with Volunteers — Effectively

There is no substitute for systematic, continuous community tree care programs that are adequately funded by local governments. But rarely is there enough money to do all that is needed to plant trees or to care for those we have. Volunteers can help fill the gap. From planting crews to fund raisers, volunteers can supplement the work of professionals, strengthen social bonds within the community, and provide advocacy and support for tree programs.

"We promise not to waste your time." This was welcome reassurance in a letter of invitation to participate as a volunteer in a new project. In fact, the concept behind the statement is probably central to the success of working with volunteers.

Each year Americans contribute some 15 million hours of time to good causes, including tree programs. In most cases, volunteers are already busy people and in all cases they have hearts of gold and a sincere desire to make the world a better place in which to live. These people deserve our thanks — and they deserve careful attention so the best possible use is made of their time and talents.

In community forestry, volunteers have served on tree boards for decades, planted millions of trees, spent untold hours pruning small trees, raised large sums of money, and contributed in other ways too numerous to list. Of the many lessons that have emerged from this experience, perhaps the most essential is that when volunteers are well-organized and guided by skilled leaders, the result is mutual satisfaction for both the individual and community officials.

Unfortunately, too often the happy marriage between volunteers and managers soon goes sour. In some cases, volunteers find that they are really not needed. Standing around on a cold, spring morning with more people than trees to be planted is nobody's definition of a good use of time. Neither is sitting in on a poorly conducted meeting that goes on and on, dominated by a few outspoken individuals or producing little more than the need to schedule another meeting.

Then, too, there are professionals who have been let down by volunteers. Many have watched initial enthusiasm wither away when the fun wears off. Others have been promised equipment, supplies or donations that don't materialize. And then there is the matter of long-term care of a project site or trees that have been planted. Many urban foresters have found that volunteers show little interest in watering, pruning, stake removal or the other care a young tree needs in the years following planting. If crews are not able to handle the additional work load, the trees suffer and the project may even fail.

When well managed — and when not expected to substitute for the professional work force that is the backbone of larger communities — volunteers are a valuable resource. When not managed effectively, or when city officials view volunteers as a way to avoid financial responsibility for trees, volunteers can actually be detrimental to community forestry. In the pages that follow are suggestions that should help nourish a positive, beneficial relationship both within volunteer groups and between volunteers and the professionals with whom they work on behalf of trees.
Avoiding Start-Up Pitfalls

Every volunteer program begins differently. It may be a spontaneous project, such as neighbors dealing with the aftermath of a severe storm, or it may be a lone individual trying desperately to interest others in turning a vision into reality. In community forestry, the most common situation is the attempt to start an organization such as a tree board, neighborhood association or tree-planting team.

How to start depends so much on circumstances that it is difficult to offer general guidelines. However, proverbial hindsight does clearly point out some common problems. When planning to start a volunteer organization or project, this checklist may help you navigate past the pitfalls to success.

✅ Recruit one or two key people

Every volunteer group needs at least one or two key people. Call them 'spark plugs,' 'workhorses,' or by some other name, the fact is that they are the individuals who will work hardest, stay longest, and determine success or failure of the effort. Do not go to square one before identifying these people and privately enlisting their help.

✅ Watch for key detractors

At the other end of the spectrum, there will usually be key detractors. Try to think of who these may be and contact them before your project is made public. Attempt to win their support through involvement, or at least neutralize their opposition through flattery, making sure they are well informed, or just about whatever else the situation requires.

✅ Make your first meeting exceptional

Make sure your first meeting is especially well planned. It is deadly to gather a group, then ask, “Now, what should we do?” Be prepared with a solid idea for action, or at least be ready to clearly outline the need that can be met by the group.

✅ Have an agenda

Make sure your agenda includes approximate times to spend on each item. Stick to it. The group will be amazed!

✅ Use finesse

This is especially important for implementing the above two points. Be reasonably structured and prepared, but also allow enough latitude and time for others to contribute ideas and feel involved from the start. In other words, provide a solid framework, then let the group fill in around it.

✅ Develop good meeting skills

Conducting a good meeting and steering a volunteer group requires skills. These are learnable skills, but they do take effort. Read How to Make Meetings Work by Michael Doyle and David Strauss (Jove Books, New York) and the two key references listed on page 8.

✅ Think partnerships

This will avoid wasteful duplication, prevent opposition, and add muscle to your effort. Target an individual with each government or private organization that should be involved. Invite him/her to the first meeting and stay in close contact thereafter.

✅ Close your meeting effectively

Close your first meeting with agreement on follow-up, specific assignments, and the time and date for the next meeting. When possible, also end with a little fun — refreshments, entertainment, or giveaways, for example.

The Confession of a City Forester

It was a crisp, cloudless autumn day — the perfect Saturday morning to launch our community’s first street tree inventory. Ten volunteers had showed up at my earlier training session, so I thought all was in order. Imagine my surprise when 50 people showed up that morning, ranging from scouts to the elderly! Virtually all were ill-prepared for inventory work, including doing even the simplest of tasks such as correctly reading a diameter tape. The day turned into a nightmare and, not surprisingly, only 3 to 5 people showed up on subsequent weekends.

Like most nightmares, this one scared me half to death. It also scared our city attorney who was quite concerned about the lack of training and safety equipment such as traffic vests. For me, it was clearly self-examination time!

That experience taught me a valuable lesson that I put into practice the second time around — be prepared. My first mistake was in not making it clear in my initial publicity that the training workshop and advance sign-up was required in order to help with the field work. The announcement also should have mentioned bringing a lunch and something to drink, or, as I did on later projects, that these important items would be provided. From that first experience I also learned to:

• not overestimate the technical knowledge and abilities of volunteers, and to spend more time explaining why we do a particular project.
• map out specific blocks for each team to inventory, and make sure enough roving supervisors are available to help and to check on the accuracy of data.
• use simple equipment such as Biltmore sticks instead of clinometers.
• make printed material available explaining the project, not only for the volunteers, but for the volunteers to give to curious residents and pedestrians.
• continuously and publicly recognize the service of my volunteers.

That Saturday nightmare did not sour me on volunteerism. It taught me a valuable lesson that enabled me to now use volunteers very effectively in many aspects of my community forestry program.

— Mike Bowman, City Forester (Retired)
Lewiston, Idaho
Understanding Volunteers

In a study of tree care volunteers in Chicago, Lynne Westphal of the USDA Forest Service’s North Central Forest Experiment Station asked rhetorically, “What drives people to spend their spare time outdoors in all kinds of weather spreading compost, digging in the mud, and risking their backs hauling mulch? And why trees? Why not volunteer at the local hospital or to help the symphonic orchestra?”

The answer she found will not surprise many veterans of community forestry. Simply, these people love trees.

Under the microscope of social science research, volunteers in Westphal’s study — and probably true of volunteers elsewhere — revealed a passion for trees that borders on religious devotion. These people said they value community trees most for such reasons as bringing nature closer to people, being aesthetically pleasing and good for the environment, providing shade, and providing spiritual benefits.

Importantly, Westphal also found differences among the values held by the volunteers she studied. For example, older volunteers and those who owned homes tended to focus more on the practical values of trees. They also recognized that city trees can present problems such as dropping debris or clogging sewers.

By recognizing both the sincere passion that is common among community forestry volunteers and that there are differences between individuals within the army of tree lovers, it is possible to more efficiently manage volunteer efforts and provide satisfaction to the participants. Here is a checklist of other differences found among volunteers and presented by G. Greger and E. Yandle in Volunteer Program Training Guide (Oregon State University Extension Service). These are six factors that motivate people to volunteer. In each case, suggestions have been added by Dr. William McLaughlin of the University of Idaho about what community forestry assignments might work best with people in each motivation category. By getting to know a new volunteer, it usually does not take long to identify which of these motivations is at work. Remember, however, as with any other personality trait, more than one of these factors are probably influencing most individuals.

Altruism/Public Duty

The general good or public interest is the primary concern with these volunteers. They tend to be idealistic and place a high premium on fairness, just decisions, and learning. Tasks best suited to this group include getting all elements of the community involved in projects, addressing community-wide goals, dealing with conflicting values, and learning about government and its operations.

Assignments:
√ Planning and coordinating large tree-planting events
√ Organizing Arbor Day or Tree City USA award ceremonies
√ Serving on tree boards and/or liaison positions with city council, planning and zoning, or other units of government
√ Serving on beautification and appearance committees
√ Developing or improving ordinances
√ Conducting surveys to define community desires, goals, etc.
√ Planning and conducting programs with schools or other organizations
√ Promoting urban forestry with other groups

Affiliation

These individuals need social contacts. They enjoy working with others and making new friends. Being liked is a major concern and they feel a need for the support of other people in whatever they do. They want to feel at home in a group and to be a real part of it. Solo tasks are not for them, but they do well with intense tasks that can result in gaining support from other organizations. In short, social interaction is very important.

Assignments:
√ Participating in tree planting projects
√ Planning and conducting social events
√ Conducting workshops
√ Selling T-shirts, trees, memberships, etc.
√ Developing organizational identity through logos and media promotions
√ Being in charge of volunteer recognition or awards events
√ Serving as liaison with service clubs

Recognition

These volunteers have a need to be recognized for the good work they do. They are concerned about status and prestige and do well at projects that have high visibility and lots of public relations value. It is also important that the projects have well defined outputs rather than vague or on-going results. Tasks to which these individuals respond best include helping with newsworthy events or projects that result in tangible rewards (plaques, citations, etc.), and being part of an elite group that makes decisions.

Assignments:
√ Ceremonial tree plantings
√ Organizing or taking part in an Arbor Day ceremony
√ Being on a TV or radio talk show
√ Representing the city at Tree City USA award events
√ Authoring bylined articles for newspapers and magazines
√ Being the liaison person with government or elected officials, or with corporate officers

Continued:...
Achievement

Achievement, or the desire to pursue excellence, drives these individuals. They are concerned about performing with perfection and being innovative. They are also likely to be more competitive than others. Achievement-oriented volunteers need challenging tasks, constant feedback on performance, and the opportunity to learn and do new things.

Assignments:
- Liaison with local utilities to resolve conflicts involving trees and aesthetics
- Monitoring insect/disease conditions
- Providing leadership in hazard tree reduction projects
- Keeping track and seeking improvement of planting survival
- Serving as neighborhood tree warden for monitoring problems, doing minor pruning, etc.
- Representing the tree board at training sessions or conferences

Power

These volunteers desire to have influence. Possessing authority is important and they like to be involved in decisions. They often feel the need to be in control of others, such as directing fellow volunteers. They enjoy planning and making decisions about programs or events, and they prefer to be able to deal directly with community political leaders.

Assignments:
- Serving as committee chair
- Being a board member with decision-making powers
- Directing tree planting on site
- Developing position statements or proposals for decision-makers
- Serving as liaison with political figures
- Helping to enforce ordinance provisions

Preservation

Environmental responsibility is utmost on the minds of these volunteers. They are concerned with changes in the environment and always seek to make sure that any projects or programs in the community are in accord with what is best for the environment. These individuals are likely to be very concerned about the quality of development in the community. They also excel at teaching others about the environment and will be interested in any efforts they believe directly benefit environmental quality.

Assignments:
- Developing public education materials and programs
- Teaching children’s programs
- Speaking at service clubs
- Working on planting, tree maintenance, and habitat improvement projects
- Helping to write and enforce ordinances
- Serving as liaison with the parks commission
- Managing natural areas
- Fund raising

Five Steps to Successful Volunteer Management

Awareness of some basic management techniques will go far toward making volunteerism a satisfying experience. This, in turn, will contribute to a longer period of volunteer service, a higher level of productivity and quality, and more benefits to the community. Leaders and coordinators of volunteers at all levels should consider these steps as a way to assure good working relationships with volunteers.

Whether you are overseeing a volunteer tree planting crew or chairing a tree board, applying a few principles of good management will provide a more satisfactory experience for everyone.
1. Recruit Effectively

There is nothing like an adequate number of helpers to make a task seem easier.

This may mean asking for help from other organizations for specific projects. Local service clubs have a history of helping with park and tree projects. Adequate numbers are also necessary to assure the continuity of any program or organization as people move away or leave for other reasons. This makes recruiting an on-going effort and it presents the opportunity to bring in new ideas, new strengths, and a wider network of contacts. These benefits are enhanced even further when a special effort is made to assure diversity of age, sex, and ethnic backgrounds.

Successful recruiting usually results from:

- Including member recruitment as part of the year’s plan of work.
- Making an additional plan specifically for how recruiting will be done.
- Using a flier, poster, or other graphic material to portray current projects as interesting, exciting and worthwhile. It also helps to describe how the volunteer benefits from the experience. Ask local media to help by providing free air time or print space.
- Personally asking individuals who you know could contribute. Have others in your group do likewise. Most people who do not volunteer were never asked.
- Following up promptly when someone expresses interest.

2. Provide Direction

Most volunteers want direction. There are many ways to provide guidance, including using agendas at meetings and assigning specific, do-able tasks complete with deadlines and a clear idea about the expected outcome or product. Another technique that is sometimes helpful is the use of position descriptions. Use a separate description for each position such as "board member," "secretary," "council president," etc. The elements of each should include:

- Title
- General responsibilities
- Approximate amount of time required
- Qualifications
- Specific tasks and activities

In all cases, potential volunteers should receive a copy before accepting a position.

3. Provide Orientation & Training

All newcomers should receive a manual or packet of information about the organization and some individual attention from the leader or other long-time member. When several people join, an orientation session may be a good idea. Either way, orientation should include:

- the history, goals and mission of the organization
- all important policies
- the chain of command and directory of who's who
- instruction for tasks or duties (with reading materials and/or videos, if necessary)

All members should regularly be given opportunities to attend workshops, conferences and other educational programs. Another way to assure personal growth and continuing education is to provide subscriptions to pertinent publications and enrollment in the many correspondence courses offered through The National Arbor Day Foundation.

4. Supervise

An important part of successful volunteer management is trust and delegation of duties. Avoid what masters of volunteer management Andy and Katie Lippis refer to as "the one-person-tree-machine syndrome." Volunteers are usually capable people, and they want to help. After spelling out their responsibilities in accordance with the position description, step back and let the person share the workload. Communicate regularly with each volunteer, providing positive feedback as well as suggestions when needed. Be sure to explain how their tasks and projects fit into the overall management of the community forest. Under worse case situations, especially if assignments are not being done, it may be necessary to ask the volunteer to resign.

5. Thank!

Experts call this 'recognition' and some volunteers need it more than others. But in all cases it is important to publicly thank individuals for faithful participation and special achievements. Do this often and sincerely. Phony statements or undeserved recognition are worse than none at all. Instead, when recognition is due, vary it according to circumstances and what the individual will appreciate most. This can range from a handwritten note from the leader to a formal plaque or other tangible award.

Most importantly, publicize the recognition through newsletters and local media. This not only provides a sense of satisfaction to the awardee, but is a good way to build a positive image for your group and encourage others to join or participate more fully.

When the job is not getting done

When assigned tasks are not being completed by some members of a group, morale among the productive workers can quickly deteriorate. To meet the challenge and correct the problem, try these methods:

- Discuss the problem privately with the offender and ask his/her cooperation in correcting the problem.
- Set up a job matrix on a bulletin board with tasks, meeting attendance, etc. across the top and volunteers' names down the side. Place marks as appropriate. This will be visible to everyone and will put pressure on non-participants if their status in the group means anything to them.
- Bring in a respected professional or the head of a successful sister organization to evaluate your program. Have him or her present the results to the group, concluding with open discussion and a listing of ways to correct the problems.
- Use incentives for participation such as appropriate books or other prizes, trips, plaques and similar awards.
There is a great sense of satisfaction when volunteer groups and projects function successfully. Here are two of many examples that highlight the potential of supplementing community tree programs with volunteer projects.

Changing the World — Volunteers, Kids & Trees

"Inspirings." "Commendable." "We need more like it!"

These are expressions sometimes heard about volunteer efforts, but Connecticut's Youth/Mentor/Trees project eludes adequate accolades. Here is a program that not only gets trees planted and maintained, but also provides unprecedented social values in the process. On top of that, its founders are not jealously possessive of their logo or bent upon protecting turf. Quite the contrary. The Cooperative Extension System at the University of Connecticut wants you to steal their ideas, use their logo, and change the program name to whatever suits you. They simply want to plant a concept nationwide like Johnny planted apple seeds.

The idea began with the Middlesex Police Department, working closely with the Middlesex Urban Forest Commission. The concept is to pair police officers or other responsible adults with at-risk youth. To do it, the relationship begins by jointly planting a tree in the kid's neighborhood. Thereafter, sporting events, outings and other activities are planned to foster the adult-youth relationship, but maintaining the pair's tree remains a focal point.

According to Associate Extension Educator Robert M. Ricard, the first event took place on Arbor Day, 1991, in a public housing area known as Traverse Square. Seventeen youngsters were linked up with 17 police officers and 17 'adopted' trees. The results? Today there is 100 percent survival of trees in an area where vandalism normally takes a high toll, and there are a lot of young people who see cops as humans — and good-hearted ones, at that.

To initiate a similar program in your community, you need: (1) a mentor group (police, firefighters, business owners, clergy, etc.), (2) a means of identifying young people in need of adult companionship, and (3) a tree organization willing to provide technical assistance, raise funds to buy trees, and coordinate planting with municipal officials.

For a free copy of the action guide, The Youth/Mentors/Trees Project, contact: Cooperative Extension Center, 1800 Asylum Ave., West Hartford, CT 06117 (phone: 860/570-9257 or fax: 860/570-9008).

"Volunteer tree groups grown from the bottom up rather than dictated from the top down are the most successful," observes Michelle. And to prove it she points to the Tree Preservation Subcommittee in Kansas City as an example of one of the outstanding success stories from her tenure as volunteer coordinator.

The subcommittee formed on its own in response to rapid development and annexation of rural lands surrounding Kansas City. It was also guided by philosophy that in Kansas, especially, every tree counts. Key individuals in the group included city foresters Bob Haines of Overland Park, George Osborne of Lawrence, Terry Birtels of Topeka, Kevin Smith of Johnson County, and Rick Spurgeon of Olathe. They were joined by tree activist David Schaffer of Wyandotte County and a number of other interested citizens. Their goal: to preserve trees before and during building construction. Michelle relates this story of how the group went from the idea stage to action that is resulting in hundreds of trees being saved to grace new neighborhoods in suburban Kansas City and elsewhere throughout the state.

The group's first move was to gather and read every article and bulletin available that dealt with the subject of tree preservation. Once informed themselves, the subcommittee wrote and produced a brochure titled Trees to Build Around. Next, they put on their fundraising caps to get the brochure produced. A graphic artist contributed her time, a local paper company contributed recycled paper, and printing costs were defrayed by a printing company. The resulting 3-color brochure, complete with photos taken in the local area, is a remarkable avenue for effective communication.

Once completed, the brochure was distributed in person and by mail to local home builder groups and real estate agents. In Merriam, Kansas, tree board member Paul C. Cole personally puts the brochure in the hands of every developer that requests a building permit in the city.

Since a mature tree has a significant summer cooling effect, takes up carbon dioxide, and releases enough oxygen in a day to keep four people supplied with fresh air, each tree saved is making a difference in the quality of life for the residents of the Kansas City area. Throughout Kansas, public awareness about tree preservation before and during construction has increased dramatically, and it is all due to the efforts of self-motivated volunteers.

Group with a Focus —

Saving Trees at Construction Sites

Michelle Mazzola was for many years the highly successful volunteer coordinator for Kansas State and Extension Forestry. Under her direction, the Kansas Urban Forestry Council grew from a group of 15 people with a shared interest in environmental issues to a statewide non-profit organization comprised of more than 400 dedicated volunteers.

Michelle's success, she says, was due to proactive communication on her part and dedicated action by volunteers.

A brochure produced for and distributed directly to builders was a product of a group of determined city foresters and volunteers with a goal to save trees at construction sites.
**Checklist of Appropriate Tasks**

A common concern in urban and community forestry is how volunteers can best serve and what is best handled by professional foresters and arborists. The answers depend largely on community size, availability of municipal and private sector professionals, and the skill levels of volunteers. However, in most cases there are more than enough tree program needs for everyone to be productively involved. Here is a general guide to what functions might best be served by volunteers and professionals.

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Other Sources of Information

Complete Set of Tree City USA Bulletins
An excellent way to bring new volunteers 'up to speed' on urban and community forestry is to provide them with a complete set of Tree City USA Bulletins. The set includes 45 issues contained in two attractive 3-ring binders. Available for $99 from The National Arbor Day Foundation.

The Two Best Books

Of the many useful references on how to do a better job of working with volunteers, here are two that are 'must' books for anyone in community forestry.

A Handbook for Tree Board Members by Gene W. Grey
This 50-page book from The National Arbor Day Foundation is designed to prepare all new or prospective tree board members for a productive, fulfilling volunteer role in their communities. Easy to read and well illustrated, topics range from what is expected of a tree board member to some of the basic technical elements of managing community trees. Publication was made possible by a grant from the USDA Forest Service, with the goal being to reach every tree board member in the nation. Gratis copies were distributed to all state urban and community forestry coordinators. Additional copies are available at the nominal price of $2.95 each, 25 for $59, or 50 for $99 from:

The National Arbor Day Foundation
100 Arbor Avenue
Nebraska City, NE 68410

The Simple Act of Planting A Tree by Andy & Katie Lipkis
This book is actually more about organizing and supporting volunteers to plant trees than it is about the technical aspects of planting, and rightfully so. Technical problems pale next to the challenges of fund raising and managing armies of eager tree planters and maintainers. No other publication of its kind provides such rich detail or is written in such an entertaining style. Soft back, 237 pages, and available from:

TreePeople
12601 Mulholland Drive
Beverly Hills, CA 90210

Resource Kit for Volunteers
The National Arbor Day Foundation, with support from Toyota, has produced a comprehensive kit for working effectively with volunteers on tree planting projects. Included are:
- 80-page Leadership Guide full of ideas and "how-to" information.
- Checklists for organizing committees and for fundraising.
- Budget worksheets and other "reproducibles."
- Celebrate Arbor Day Guidebook with history, poems, quotes, program ideas.
- Beautifully-produced video to motivate volunteers and train for proper tree planting.
Available for $29.95 plus shipping and handling. To order, phone Member Services at 888/448-7337 or visit arborday.org.

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1. How to Prune Young Shade Trees 1. __________
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3. Resolving Tree-Sidewalk Conflicts 3. __________
4. The Right Tree for the Right Place 4. __________
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6. How to Hire an Arborist 6. __________
7. How to Save Trees During Construction 7. __________
8. Don't Top Trees! 8. __________
9. Writing a Municipal Tree Ordinance 9. __________
10. Plant Trees for America 10. __________
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24. Trees and Parking Lots 24. __________
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26. Understanding Landscape Cultivars 26. __________
27. How to Manage Community Natural Areas 27. __________
28. Placing a Value on Trees 28. __________
29. How to Plan for Management 29. __________
30. Ten Tree Myths to Think About 30. __________
31. Tree Protection Ordinances 31. __________
32. Let's Stop Salt Damage 32. __________
33. How to Interpret Trees 33. __________
34. How to Fund Community Forestry 34. __________
35. Protect Trees During Underground Work 35. __________
36. How to Work With Volunteers Effectively 36. __________

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