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Berkeley residents can request free saplings to combat tree inequity

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Last Thursday afternoon, two dozen small children crowded the sidewalk along James Kenney Park in West Berkeley, eagerly mulching and watering six newly planted trees. The sour gum and trident maple saplings represent the start of a city effort to correct a longstanding inequity in Berkeley's urban forest.

Wealthier parts of Berkeley, in the hills and to the north, have lush tree canopies and higher "tree-equity" scores than lower-income, more diverse communities in the city's west and south, [according to a series of maps](#) produced last year by the nonprofit American Forests. Experts say the inequity has major ramifications for environmental health.

"We've known there is a problem for a long time," Berkeley Parks Director Scott Ferris said. But it wasn't until recently that state funds became available to address the inequity, he said.

So far, the city has planted over 200 trees in industrial areas throughout West Berkeley — courtesy of a \$725,000 state grant awarded in March 2020 to fund tree planting in neighborhoods with low canopy cover.

Last week's James Kenney Park tree planting was a celebration of a new \$500,000 California Transportation Commission grant, awarded in February, that will allow Berkeley to expand the project. (The city has kicked in \$315,000 to supplement the two grants.)

Over the next 15 months, the city intends to plant 1,200 to 1,800 trees in residential neighborhoods throughout northwest and southwest Berkeley. In addition, 350 trees will be planted in San Pablo Park, University Avenue and Aquatic Park, including 100 as a "wall of trees" along I-580 to reduce freeway noise, Ferris said.

City staff will work closely with residents to determine where and what to plant, said city arborist Ian Kesterson. The trees are available for free and will be planted in the public right-of-way at the edge of the sidewalk.

Dozens of species will be planted, with city staff offering residents in different neighborhoods a curated list of four or five options that will work best for their area. "You get to pick what you think looks cool. There's usually an evergreen option or deciduous fall color tree, maybe something with showy flowers," Kesterson said. "It is a public utility, but it's also your thing. There's a lot of emotional attachment to our trees."

On streets without an existing planting area, staff will cut concrete on a portion of the sidewalk to expose the soil. The grants cover the cost of concrete cutting and the cost of three summers of watering — the time it takes for a new sapling to survive. If residents are unable to water, city staff will irrigate the trees with water trucks.

While many residents appreciate the beauty of urban trees, their value extends far beyond the aesthetic, said Nancy Hughes, executive director of the nonprofit California Urban Forests Council.

“So many of us will look at trees as background, kind of as inanimate objects,” said Hughes. “We don’t realize how many benefits there are.”

The EPA estimates that urban trees can [lower neighborhood temperatures](#) in the summer by 2-9 degrees as their limbs shade the street and their leaves release water vapor.

The leaves also attract dust and small particulates, improving air quality, said Hughes.

Air quality is particularly important in historically disadvantaged neighborhoods in south and west Berkeley located closer to freeways and disproportionately affected by diesel particulate pollution.

[A 2019 paper](#) from UC Berkeley and UCSF Joint Medical Program found that elevated pollution is among the reasons that residents of historically redlined communities in Berkeley and other East Bay cities have [higher rates of asthma](#). (Redlining is a racially discriminatory mortgage lending practice that concentrated people of color in South and West Berkeley.)

Health disparities are “directly related to where people live,” said Berkeley Councilmember Rashi Kesarwani. “So the fact that we can add these trees to these neighborhoods is really important.”

Kesterson, the city arborist, echoed the many benefits of urban forests, including making walking and cycling a more enticing alternative to driving.

“Even a fallen leaf stuck in the gutter is going to help filter dirty water going down the drain,” said Kesterson. “There’s no part of trees that doesn’t make the environment and quality of life around it better for everyone.”

The new plantings also represent an opportunity to create an urban forest adapted to Berkeley’s future climate. The trees planted today won’t fully mature for 50 years and are being chosen to withstand the heat and drought of the Bay Area’s future climate.

“The trees that have been planted in the last 100 years were planted purely on aesthetics, or following nursery trends,” said Kesterson. Many of these require supplemental water to survive California’s lengthy droughts. “We are working with climate change models for what Berkeley is going to look like in 2070.”

There are currently around 40,000 trees maintained by the city of Berkeley in parks, streets and medians. “We have available space for 10,000 more. That’s our big goal.” Kesterson said.

Source: <https://www.berkeleyside.org/2022/03/08/trees-make-life-better-berkeley>