

The Middletown Press

Middletown plants 18 trees as part of beautification project in urban area

11 May 2020



Photo: Cassandra Day / Hearst Connecticut Media

MIDDLETOWN — In an effort to beautify the area and create a more sustainable landscape, the city has completed its replanting the North End project, paid for by a \$6,000 grant from the U.S. Housing and Urban Development Department.

After securing one of the agency's Community Development Block Grants, crews placed 18 mostly native trees.

The approximately five-year-old trees, which provides benefits to residents as well as the environment, were purchased from Pride's Corner Farms in Cromwell.

Among the plantings are redbuds, as well as serviceberry trees, which begin paying dividends to urban neighborhoods at around year 10, "when they start absorbing more heat and more carbon," said arborist Jane Harris, chairwoman of the Middletown Urban Forestry Commission.

"By the time they open up and start to flower, the ground is soft enough that — in Colonial times — they could start having funerals again," Harris explained. "It's an indicator tree that says, 'the ground is now workable.'"

The city is populating the area with 90 percent native trees. "They will be able to feed the birds and insects," Harris added.

On hand for the operation were Gabriel Russo of [Forest City Farms](#), as well as [Middletown Garden Club](#) members Patsy Hofer and former Mayor Maria Madsen Holzberg. Trees were planted beginning early in the morning Monday in the area bordered by Main and Washington streets and High and North Main streets.

Native species fare well in urban conditions, Harris said. They provide shade during the hotter months, “which makes it much more friendly to walk and bicycle.”

They also absorb carbon, which helps ameliorate climate change, and provide food for insects, which, in turn, feed the birds. “It’s a whole cycle of nature that is amplified by putting in trees,” she added.

Middletown, known as the Forest City, has been honored with the Arbor Day Foundation’s [Tree City USA](#) designation for nearly 30 years in a row.

Public Works Director William Russo (no relation to Forest City Farms’ Gabriel Russo) also was on hand to supervise activities. He praised Middletown community development specialist Lynda MacPherson for securing the CDBG monies.

Application guidelines require funds be used in primarily residential areas. At least 51 percent of residents must be of low to moderate income based on 2000 U.S. Census tracts and blocks, MacPherson explained. Projects also must meet the HUD national objective for tree planting or beautification.

The [Citizen’s Advisory Committee](#) approved the reprogramming of grant funds from unspent dollars from prior years’ CDBG activities.

“We’re happy to support anything that has to do with the environment, with gardening, with trees,” Holzberg said.

“Jane, Mayor Holzberg and Patsy’s passion for trees, flowers and aesthetics have taught me environmental awareness,” William Russo said. The three have been instrumental in tree projects such as those at Pat Kidney Field and the [Connecticut Trees of Honor](#).

The Garden Club is also responsible for the [Gracie Ann Wall garden at Lawrence Elementary School](#).

Trees planted in recent years were chosen because they grow to a maximum of 40 feet. When dead or damaged ones are removed by crews, they are replanted on a 1:1 basis.

“We’re not looking to put trees in any more that grow 120 feet, because of recent storm activity which has felled many older trees throughout the city,” the public works director said. “We don’t want to go the old way and have (private contractors) come in in areas where there are wires.”

Gabriel Russo and his staff were subcontractors on the project. He explained the process Monday morning. After an excavator was used to dig the hole, the soil was “amended” with

a blend of leaf moss, a compost/peat blend he makes. That is mixed with native soil and slow, biodegradable poultry manure fertilizer, he said. The mixture will feed the tree for a year or two.

“It’s organic material. Plants want to consume minerals,” he added.

Once the trees are taken from the ground and moved to another location, they effectively experience a great shock.

The first year they’re in the ground is often the toughest time, Gabriel Russo said. “It’s working hard to get established. It doesn’t have all the roots — just plucked out of the field somewhere, spaded out, then transplanted to a completely different environment.”

Hofer said the Forest City is envied by many garden associations across the country. “They’re just amazed. A lot of them haven’t established that relationship (with public works). I say, ‘go for it,’” Hofer said.

One of the biggest expenses in any municipality is treatment of stormwater runoff, Harris explained. “If you can break that up, and cause the water to sink into the ground instead of causing urban flooding, you reduce the amount of sewer capacity you have to have.”

Inner city areas need trees for people’s mental health, she added. “Studies have shown that when hospital patients have a window to look out of and see a tree, they go home about a day sooner than people who are looking out on a brick wall.”

The Middletown Garden Club planned a cocktail party during an event, “The Enduring Inspiration of Trees,” originally scheduled for June 17 at the Wadsworth Mansion, however, will be rescheduled due to the coronavirus pandemic, Holzberg said.

Source: <https://www.middletownpress.com/middletown/article/Middletown-plants-18-trees-as-part-of-15262765.php>