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# Urban Forestry 2020: A closer look at an emerging profession

By Susan D. Day and Gregory A. Dahle

Urban Forestry 2020 is a three-year collaborative project set to analyze the status of the urban forestry profession, and in particular, to focus on issues of professional recruitment and education. In the United States, modern development of the profession of “Urban Forestry” can ostensibly be viewed as beginning in the early 1970s when Congress added the stewardship of urban forests to the responsibilities of the U.S. Forest Service. Forty years later, urban forestry is a vibrant and expanding field of study that is clearly not practiced exclusively by, or even predominantly by, those trained in traditional natural resource management fields.

Over recent decades, arborists, horticulturists, and landscape architects have brought their expertise in managed trees and landscapes to a now considerable body of knowledge. In more recent years, social scientists, planners, ecologists, and geographers are weighing in and making significant contributions to urban forestry knowledge and practice. With all these enthusiastic participants, a career in urban forestry, particularly in local government, can be difficult to navigate. What is the career trajectory of an urban forester? What type of education should an urban forester have? Are urban foresters well networked? What is the highest professional recognition an urban forester can achieve? Do urban foresters get

the professional respect and funding needed to get the job done?

The answers to these questions depend upon whom you ask—their professional and educational background, where they work, and their area of specialization. The diversity inherent in the world of urban forestry is stimulating and exciting—but creates difficulties as well. There are numerous allied professionals who address urban forest management (and practice aspects of urban forestry—e.g., urban planners, developers, landscape architects, natural resource professionals, or traditional foresters). So where does a practitioner turn to for professional development or engagement? Urban forestry conferences are offered by everyone from grassroots nonprofits to the Association of American Geographers. Should future urban foresters pursue degrees in forestry, arboriculture, social sciences, horticulture, or urban planning? What do the few academic programs that are tagged “urban forestry” have to offer? Each of these career paths have merit.

However, this confusing picture of present-day urban forestry practice can make recruitment, the development of professional standards and best practices, and promotion within the field difficult. Many urban foresters relate that they “accidentally fell” into the profession—starting in an allied field and gradually gaining specialized skills and knowledge over the course of their careers. And yet, as our body of knowledge advances, learning-as-you-go may no longer be the best option, and accidental recruitment may not be enough to support the expanding need for urban foresters.

It is common for professions to go through such growing pains. Our highly urbanized, interconnected world is now becoming fully cognizant of the power of interdisciplinary problem-solving. Urban forestry is highly interdisciplinary, and also a young and emerging profession—offering us the unique opportunity to analyze the state of the profession and map our way forward. The Urban Forestry 2020 project, partially funded by a U.S. Forest Service grant through the National Urban and Community Advisory Council, brings together researchers from Virginia Tech, West Virginia University, University of Maryland, and Virginia State University to make this assessment in the

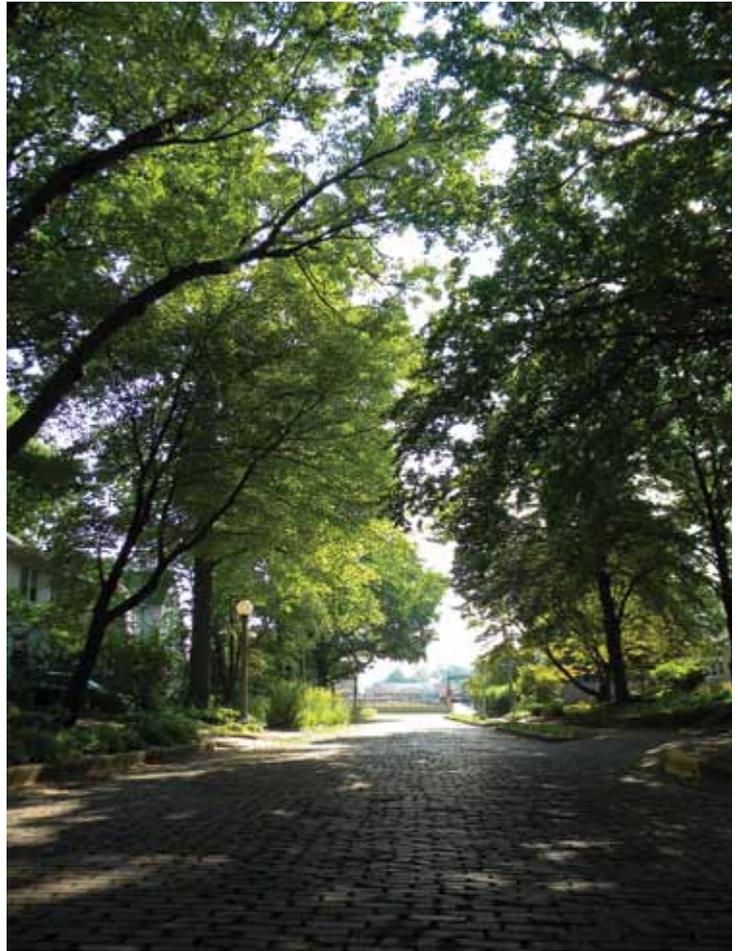


The Urban Forestry 2020 steering committee members discuss and explore the roles of an urban forester in the management of green infrastructure in relation to the roles of allied professionals.

context of university programs, student career goals, and networking. Urban Forestry 2020 has assembled an interdisciplinary steering committee, consisting of leaders in urban forestry and its allied fields. This committee acts as a sounding board and networking hub to help determine where the profession stands today as well as helping shape project research.

Based on discussions with the steering committee, and at various professional meetings, we have identified key strengths that professionals designated as “urban foresters” bring to the management of urban greenspaces. Urban foresters are more likely than allied professionals to be engaged in forest health, inventory and risk assessment, planting trees, and arboricultural practices. Urban foresters are equally likely to be engaged in green infrastructure planning, and less likely to be engaged or consulted in land-use planning.

Notably, while urban foresters feel that they have multiple, valuable, local, or regional networks and organizations to help them problem solve, there is no universal list of professional development organizations. How the networking landscape develops over the next decade is difficult to estimate because communication among professionals is increasingly linked to social media and is highly dynamic. As others have observed, younger professionals tend to push boundaries in career and networking exploration, and may quickly form new groups to problem solve. How effective are such networks at the collective action needed to elevate urban forestry as a valued profession? The only certainty available to us now is that we will continue to see changes in urban forestry networking, and they may be quite rapid.



Enlisting trees to keep urban communities safe, aesthetically pleasing, and within the range of certain beneficial ecosystem services is a valuable task made all the more challenging for urban foresters who have no universal list of professional development organizations.



In recent years, social scientists, planners, ecologists, and geographers have made increasingly significant contributions to urban forestry knowledge and practice. This is evident in burgeoning utility of greenspaces everywhere.



Urban Forestry 2020 is using both research and exploratory focus groups as well as networking to develop meaningful recommendations for urban forestry. We have, to date, developed and vetted diagrams of urban forestry practice, while additional research is underway concerning perceptions of urban forestry.

In one project, developed by Virginia Tech doctoral student Keith O'Herrin, 18 months of national job postings for urban foresters are being analyzed against the "body of knowledge" expected of urban foresters. Through this, we anticipate identifying professional and regional trends: What level of education is required? What types of duties and academic disciplines cluster together? What are the pay scales?

West Virginia University graduate student Andrew Benjamin is developing a survey to be administered this winter that will query the largest 200 cities in the United States on their hiring practices for urban foresters. What skills (technical, administrative, and communication) are these cities looking for when hiring an entry level urban forester, and do they observe any deficiencies? Although urban forestry has long worked to promote urban trees and foster more awareness from the public, this has not translated into a sizable upturn in the number of young people seeking urban forestry education or pursuing urban forestry as a profession.

Another Virginia Tech survey of first- and second-year college students will introduce urban forestry through a short video, and ask how these students view the profession as a potential career.

This is an exciting time for the management of our urban forest resources. Over the past 40 years, we have grown from a Congressional mandate into a profession that, while young, is changing the way we consider the natural resource in and around our cities, towns, and communities. Urban forestry is coalescing and developing organically, regardless of whether we are ready for it. Our profession is interdisciplinary by nature, and its boundaries are being tested on all sides. What will the next 40 years bring, and how shall we steer the profession? With Urban Forestry 2020, we hope to provide some answers, or at least some guidance, as we find our way.

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*Other members of the UF2020 research team include P. Eric Wiseman, Joe Sullivan, Joel Koci, Keith O'Herrin, and Andrew Benjamin. For more details, visit the Urban Forestry 2020 website (<http://urbanforestry.frec.vt.edu/2020>).*

## Urban Tree Health

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