

Georgia ReLeaf

More than a giveaway: strategies for increasing equity and tree longevity for tree giveaway programs



Understanding the Impact of Tree Giveaway Programs

Tree giveaway programs promote community forestry and engage residents, but do they translate into increased tree canopy and provide the associated benefits to the community?

The concept for tree giveaway programs is simple: municipal tree canopy will increase on private land as residents plant free trees, and those trees will provide public health, economic, and environmental benefits as they mature. In practice, coordinating tree giveaways that lead to increased canopy is more complex.

Few studies have tracked trees from giveaway events, but existing research suggests that tree giveaways reach a fraction of their potential impact. In one study, 12.6% of the distributed trees were not planted, and only 35.3% of the total survived to twenty-two years. Other studies show similar results.

Using giveaway programs to address tree equity is even more complex. Multiple studies found that the giveaway programs they evaluated reinforced rather than balanced disparities, because participation was higher among residents with higher income and education, rather than among the neighborhoods. Organizations can implement more effective tree giveaway programs by understanding the

gap between anticipated and actual outcomes and using both innovative ideas and proven strategies to bridge that gap.

Start by planning for outcomes instead of outputs. This strategy is a subtle shift in thinking that creates space for intention in the planning process.

Outputs are the products and activities that are part of a program, and outcomes are the changes that result from a program. In the case of a tree giveaway event, outputs could include the number of trees given away, event attendees, or materials distributed, whereas outcomes are the changes those trees create over decades: cleaner air that leads to lower rates of asthma, lower temperatures that lead to fewer heat-related deaths, and an overall better quality of life for residents.

Consider the difference between a project to distribute trees to community members and a project to reduce asthma rates in the community by increasing tree canopy. Both can be tree giveaway events, but the considerations involved to reach the desired outcomes are very different. Planning for outcomes rather than outputs necessitates considering the impacts on equity and tree longevity during the planning process for organizations to meet their objectives.

Strategies for Increasing Equity and Tree Longevity in Tree Giveaway Programs

Combine best practices for community development along with research-based tree strategies to improve long-term outcomes for giveaway programs.

Determine where trees are needed most

- The [Georgia ReLeaf Map](#) uses multiple data points to denote census tracts that are marginalized by underinvestment and overburdened by pollution.
- Review municipal canopy studies or tree inventories if available.
- Use local knowledge to identify neighborhoods that would benefit from increased tree canopy.

Engage with the community as a partner

Communicate and collaborate with the group the project is meant to benefit throughout the planning process. Take time to understand if the project meets a need felt by the community, and what barriers might limit participation. Talk to leaders of community-based organizations, local nonprofits, businesses, and faith organizations that already have relationships with that specific community if your organization does not. Listen and be willing to make changes based on the needs and wants communicated.

Recognize and identify barriers to participation and provide resources to overcome them

Barriers may include:

- Water costs incurred from irrigation
- Renters may not have permission to plant, or the incentive to invest
- Lack of access to needed tools for planting, such as tillers, shovels, rakes, water hoses, mulch, gloves, etc.
- Lack of time for planting and maintenance
- Negative perceptions of trees, such as safety concerns or long-term financial obligations associated with tree management
- Inability to transport trees
- Resident preferences for trees may not match the species recommended by community forest professionals

Integrate strategies for increasing equity

Below are strategies that other giveaway programs have incorporated to address tree equity

- **Volunteer planting** - Volunteers deliver and plant trees for residents who register to receive a tree
- **Neighborhood planting teams** - Groups of neighbors work together to plant and care for their trees
- **Switch to planting projects** - Some annual tree giveaway events have pivoted to planting fewer, but larger trees in public spaces. Research has shown that residents in low-income communities may prefer trees planted on public property, rather than private property. Consider which type of program best meets the needs of the intended project participants.
- **Community tool sheds** – Partner with a community tool library to allow participants to borrow planting tools.
- **Provide mulch and/or watering aids** – Include everything participants need for planting in the giveaway. Check with the local water department; they may have giveaways such as garden hose nozzles and connectors to promote water-use efficiency.

Integrate strategies for increasing tree longevity

- **Adopt-a-Tree** - Reframe the giveaway as an “adoption” and provide a “Certificate of Adoption”.
- **Sign Pledges** - Research has shown higher survival and growth rates when participants signed a “watering” promise. Citizens could also sign a tree care promise or a pledge to the next generation.
- **Hands-on-learning and demonstrations** - Conduct tree-planting, mulching, and other relevant demonstrations throughout the giveaway event. If planting at the site is not possible, fill a large plastic tub with soil, and use it to demonstrate proper tree planting.
- **Learning Stations** - Require participants to walk through a series of educational stations to learn how to plant, irrigate, and maintain a new tree.
- **Follow up with participants** - Text or email participants after the event to remind them to plant. Maintenance and care reminders can be sent throughout the year, and follow-up surveys can help determine what strategies are most effective.

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