

NEBRASKA

Nebraska Forest Service

Community forestry in Nebraska is “everything green and growing” and covers the gamut from public tree planting, to the creation of bioswales for stormwater management, to the establishment of native and resilient landscapes for pollinator support and beautification. In coordination with many statewide and locally based civic organizations, the majority of Nebraska Forest Service (NFS) program investment and support goes to rural communities with populations less than 5,000 due to their very limited financial and technical resources and their reliance on volunteer support.

Nebraska has a total land area of 49 million acres and is located in the heart of the Great Plains. The state has a population of approximately 1.9 million with 75 percent of the population living in the eastern third of the state. Two-thirds of the population lives within 32 communities that have populations greater than 5,000 people. The remaining 500 communities have populations of less than 5,000 people, making rural community forestry of critical importance across Nebraska’s rural landscape.

In Nebraska, community forestry is defined as the interface of people living within and managing private and public landscapes. Community forestry involves the planning, establishment, management, and protection of trees and all associated plants for social, environmental, and economic sustainability. While trees are a cornerstone of the forest, NFS also views “everything green and growing” as components of the resource in developing and managing resilient landscapes.

In Nebraska, there are about 470,000 acres of community forest, the vast majority of which is planted rather than naturally occurring. This resource serves a continuum of population, ranging from the three communities defined as metro areas with populations over 50,000 to the 529 remaining communities—the vast majority of which (500) have populations under 5,000. These population demographics, from metro to rural communities, drive how NFS provides technical, educational, and resource support.



Community forestry in Nebraska’s three metro areas is directly supported by city staff with technical support from NFS. Photo Credit: NFS



In collaboration with the Nebraska Statewide Arboretum, pollinator gardens, rain gardens, bioswales, and community arboretums play a key role in creating and demonstrating resilient landscapes across the state. Photo Credit: Nebraska Statewide Arboretum

In metro areas such as Omaha, NFS relies heavily on green industry partners, such as the Nebraska Arborists Association, to promote and deliver coordinated programming. A recent example is the partnership between NFS and Keep Omaha Beautiful, with the goal to proactively replace tree canopy with an aggressive planting program in advance of emerald ash borer (EAB). Keep Omaha Beautiful secured \$500K-\$750K for the purchase and 3-year maintenance of planting stock. NFS in turn developed very specific nursery standards to limit the planting to high quality root systems and developed a species matrix based on ROW planting area. NFS also selected the trees from nurseries, trained the planting contractors, and follows up with multiple inspections throughout the year. It is a win-win for all as NFS drives the quality assurance and Keep Omaha Beautiful secures funds and manages all of the administration.

On the other end of the spectrum are Nebraska’s rural communities. While NFS still works with many regional green industry partners for program delivery, the nature of rural community partnerships often involves local banks, churches, and civic organizations. Another key difference is that most rural community forestry programs are managed via tree or park boards or volunteer-based groups. Most of these communities are heavily reliant on technical and educational programming from NFS in the form of staff support from district foresters, community forestry specialists, and forest health and wildland fire personnel. In partnership with key organizations such as the Nebraska Statewide Arboretum, it is typical to see these rural community forestry programs collectively report the planting of 47,000 trees and invest more than 40,000 volunteer hours annually in the management and care of local resources.



Rural community forestry programs are volunteer based and require constant technical support and hands-on training. Photo Credit: NFS

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Nebraska Forest Service at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Community Forestry and Sustainable Landscapes Program
<https://nfs.unl.edu/>
<https://plantnebraska.org/>