Have you ever judged a neighborhood by its trees? I have. Without even realizing it, I've felt happy walking down an alley of green trees in the summer, in the filtered light of their giant canopies. I've also felt that a block is gloomy or deserted before noticing what makes it that way: the dead, barren pavement with no trees.

It's not just your imagination if you can relate. Studies have shown that a higher number of neighborhood trees is correlated with increased safety, better schools and more neighbors who know each others' names, not to mention more shade, less storm water flooding and cleaner air.

Coming from sun-scorched Los Angeles, trees were one of the first things I liked about New Haven—how green they are in the summer, how they change to fiery colors in the fall and the stark winter lines of their silhouettes—but I thought they had always been there. I took trees for granted. I knew that better neighborhoods have more trees, but I didn’t know why. I thought that all one could do about this was choose one neighborhood over another. And then I worked with URI.

When I became an urban forester with URI I was responsible for helping community groups green their neighborhood by planting flowers in park spaces and road medians, remediating lead-contaminated soil in front yards and planting street trees. When I met Jessica Feinleib, one of the leaders of the Westville Greenspace group of volunteers, I was ready to help, but naive to the projects that lay ahead.
Hurricane Sandy devastated the East Coast after making landfall the evening of October 29. In measuring the storm’s impact, tally of death, property damaged and households and businesses without power continue to grow. For many, the magnitude of loss is staggering, even unprecedented. We must look to the recovery with hope, as it is often in the washed aftermath of these tragedies that we witness resilience, strength and unity.

Articles in this newsletter home in on precisely these characters, with community leaders like Dr. Jessica Feinleib, who has led the planting of 100 trees in the last six years. Or Karen Washington, who this summer rallied a new group of volunteers to plant their first 16 trees. After each planting day, neighbors joined each other for summer barbecues. Ben Berkowitz and Myis Lasater, with volunteers alongside, transformed the State Street underpasses by first planting trees [see Urban Issues Fall ‘11] and then adding photographs of New Haveners along the walls. And Don Williams shows how, through tree planting, he’s had the opportunity to give back to the community and make amends for past mistakes. Each of these four stories describes remarkable people at work strengthening our city’s social fabric.

These four are representatives of hundreds more: In September we celebrated the contributions and accomplishments of our Community Greenspace volunteers. The program is now eighteen years old, and we wanted to recognize not only the numbers of trees planted or yards of compost spread but also how the numbers of years that groups have volunteered in their neighborhoods. Some of the volunteers have been involved since the very beginning. Others marked their five, ten and fifteen year milestones.

Many who are part of URI, who are residents in the City of New Haven, follow, in Don’s words, “a quest to be a better citizen.” This makes for a culture that is stronger than the storm’s winds, and for a city that will bounce back when knocked down. But there were challenges. Others marked their five, ten and fifteen year milestones.

Unlike the previous 75 trees, which were planted on residential streets, the next 25 were to be planted in the commercial zones of Westville Village. Business owners are typically less receptive than homeowners to taking on the responsibility of watering a tree. Chris Heitmann, the executive director of The Westville Village Renaissance Alliance (WVRA), partnered with Jessica to talk to the various merchants. Together with Debby Evans, the new co-chair of the Westville Community Greenspace Group, they spoke in person to owners of art galleries, stores and restaurants about how trees would make Westville even more welcoming to pedestrians. Not only did most business owners approve, but many of them made significant contributions to the tree planting and stewardship efforts.

A conversation with Mr. Chao, owner of the House of Chao Restaurant, stands out in my mind. He said that after storms and heavy flooding destroyed the streets of New Haven in 1985 new trees were planted all along the street, but he refused to receive a tree in front of his restaurant. “I insisted,” he said, “and now, over 25 years later, the only straight piece of sidewalk is in front of my building.” he pointed to the cracked and lifted chunks of cement all along the street. Indeed, the Honey Locust trees planted a quarter century ago have grown so large that they became a problem for narrow planting strips and power lines. I explained that a lot has been learned over the years, and that URI chooses appropriate trees for each location. Oaks, Red Maples, and other large trees can be planted in open areas, but in front of his restaurant we offered to plant a small tree whose roots and canopy will not threaten sidewalks or power lines even at full maturity. Mr. Chao agreed to have two trees planted, a purple-leaved Thundercloud Plum and a red-leaved Forest Pansy Redbud, whose heart-shaped leaves matched in color Mr. Chao’s overhanging awning. As Mr. Chao offered water to volunteers during the planting outside his restaurant, I realized it was a historic moment for him and the Westville community.

We continued to plant trees in front of all different types of establishments: a firehouse, a nursery school, a doctor’s office. As the summer went on, close to 200 hours were donated by volunteers. At the end, the planting of the 100th tree called for a celebration, attended by many community members and New Haven’s mayor, John DeStefano. “We, as a community,” said Jessica at the beginning of her speech, “have planted and cared for 100 trees.” She recounted cutting and breaking concrete in some areas, and removing brick pavers, by hand, from seven sites in order to make new tree pits. This hard work—cleverly termed “sweat equity”—among URI volunteers—pays off in much needed shade, enhanced sense of community and slower, safer traffic. In hard numbers, Jessica estimated that 100 trees provide the benefit of 40,000 avoided gallons of storm water runoff, 2,500 kilowatt-hours of electricity conserved from natural cooling and a 9,000 pound reduction in atmospheric carbon emissions this year alone. The benefits will only increase with time.

In her speech, Jessica proceeded to thank Chris Ozyck and Colleen Murphy-Dunning of URI, who have “always been the guiding force for this tremendous good.” She went on to thank me, her intern, and URI’s funders and supporters, including The City of New Haven, The Hixon Center for Urban Ecology, URI’s funders, and supporters, including The City of New Haven, The Hixon Center for Urban Ecology, URI’s funders and supporters, including The City of New Haven, The New Haven/URI Board Members, William B. Berrett, Jr.

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URBAN ISSUES
Spring 2012
Vol. 23, No. 2

www.yale.edu/uri

From Rainsoaked to One Hundred

(continued from page 1)
The Rhythm of Summer with Winthrop Sunshine Planters

by Katherine Romans

The Beaver Hills neighborhood of New Haven is one of the first planned subdivisions in the country. When the neighborhood developed in the early 20th century, the Beaver Hills Company established strict rules regarding house size, architectural design and setback from the road. By setting minimum home prices, they also effectively defined whom they wanted living in those homes. The result was a picturesque suburb—large single-family houses with garages alongside, well-manicured lawns, mature trees that provide shade and quiet blocks. A summer day in Beaver Hills is characterized by the distant mechanical hum of lawnmowers and birdsong. The streets are otherwise quiet and peaceful.

The Sunshine Planters Greenspace Group is based on two blocks of Winthrop Avenue that were later appended to the original planned subdivision of Beaver Hills. The 59 homes, fitted close together on two blocks between Whalley and Goffe, were designed a few decades later during New Haven’s industrial heyday and house two or three families rather than one. The yards are smaller, and many have been neglected. Old, towering maples and oaks stand alongside sickly trees, several of which will need to be taken down in the next few years. The effect is a patchwork of canopy cover and hot, shadeless stretches. The most noticeable difference cover and hot, shadeless stretches. The most noticeable difference between these blocks and the Beaver Hills historic subdivision is in their street life. Neighbors mingle on front porches and in front yards, even out in the street. Children play games on the sidewalk while their older siblings flirt with high school friends. Adults talk about the weather or sports. Music—from someone’s car stereo or a home speaker system that has been set up on a porch—sets a steady beat, the pace of the day. It is as if the sidewalk is this community’s living room, and whether you’re walking, driving or biking through you’d better take a moment to stop and say hello to the hosts.

The author with two Beaver Hills residents rolling a tree into place.

“We’re going to need hotdogs, hamburgers, chicken and juice for the kids. I definitely do not want any soda, only healthy drinks.” It was clear from our first meeting that Karen Washington, a resident of this block for the past seven years, had a vision for the Community Greenspace group she started this summer. With unfappable determination and commitment to her community, Karen set out to be the most active Greenspace group of the year, and by many metrics she achieved her goal.

The vision that Karen shared during our first meeting came to fruition week after week. Neighbors, young and old, gathered each Saturday to plant trees and flowers, to build garden beds and landscape front yards. We worked in the dry, dusty dirt to plant 300 pound trees. Children marveled at the worms and grubs, all writhing and slimy, that rose with each shovelful of soil. And whenever energy waned, Karen would find a way to recruit additional help—flagging down passing cars, rousing rowdy teenagers from their beds.

By the end of summer, the Winthrop Sunshine Planters had added 16 trees, 20 shrubs and 45 perennials to their section of Winthrop Avenue. Several workdays ended with a meal. After the tools were loaded on the truck, dirt hosed off our hands and arms and mud stomped off our shoes, we would settle in the backyard of the nearest volunteer’s home for cold drinks and lunch. Jamaican jerk chicken, Italian pasta salad, southern-style fried chicken and homemade cookies—the dishes reflected the histories and personalities of our hosts.

Though the flowers and trees remain as a physical reminder of the group’s work, the sore and aching muscles of those workdays are long forgotten. It is the food, the new friendships and the slow, easy conversation that we will remember.

The Many Faces of an Underpass

by Jancy Langley

Imagine living in a vibrant, bustling neighborhood full of restaurants and shops, welcoming shops and big-windowed brick apartments, but lacking a park, a field, a place for young and old to play catch or listen to the birds. Now imagine living in a neighborhood anchored by an ample park with an inviting playground and gracious oak-lined fields—but shops and restaurants? None. Just quiet homes without commercial amenities.

This is the situation faced by residents of Upper State Street and Jocelyn Square, two neighborhoods only a stone’s throw away from one another but separated by the wall of Interstate 95. With only the ditch, forbidding Humphrey Street underpass to connect them, Upper State and Jocelyn Square might as well be on opposite sides of the state with their complementary resources out of reach.

The neighborhood’s URI Greenspace Group, “Embrace Our Spaces,” led by two local entrepreneurs, Ben Berkowitz and Myles Lauster, creatively addressed this problem with two simple solutions and a whole lot of local elbow grease. First, they planted shade tolerant, small-stature trees under windows of light between lanes of the highway. Second, they undertook a massive public art project consisting of portraits of community members.

“Now I feel that we’ve bridged that divide [between the two neighborhoods] which, ironically, are divided by a bridge,” said Danyel Aversenti, a community member who has planted the trees last year and worked on this year’s installation. His face appears on the wall of the underpass, a six-foot-tall staring rectangle.

Last year, the group addressed the “green” part of the project with trees and perennials; in 2012, they focused on the art installation. Painters of the underpass by-six-foot black-and-white photographs taken by community members during several sessions last spring—was inspired by JR, an artist and urban activist. Similar projects have been done in Brazil, Paris, Tunisia and, most notably, in border cities of Israel and Palestine. According to JR, these projects all work to “turn the face of the community together, says, the project “not only [brought] the faces of the community together, but it’s also showing the faces of the community.” The underpass is truly changed: once an uncomfortable limbo between two neighborhoods, it now serves as a place where people linger in appreciation. The project has turned an urban space inside out.

Jancy Langley was a Greenspace intern and will graduate from Yale F&S in 2014. She is interested broadly in social ecology and environmental anthropology.
The Pleasure of Giving Back

by

Donald Williams
GreenSkills Tree Planting Technician/Crew Leader

As an Emerge CT employee supervisor working in partnership with URI, I’m often asked one question: how has URI helped me in my quest to become a better citizen? Here is the first draft of an answer.

As an ex-offender, I’ve learned a long list of skills from URI that will help me throughout my life: discipline, organization and patience. I’ve learned green and environmental skills, like how to plant and recognize the names of many different trees, the process of photosynthesis and how the trees we plant have a major impact in our neighborhoods and around the world.

URI has also allowed me to give back to a society that I once took so much from. For so many years I ran around stealing, destroying city property, even killing trees by carving my name in them. For so many years I was a negative citizen. But what changed me? I started to actually see the damage that I was causing in my community and to my neighbors. Property value was going down. People were scared to go outside. I vowed to change.

Every time I plant a tree it makes me feel good to know that I’m giving back to the community and making the great State of Connecticut a beautiful, clean and healthy place to live.

I grew up in South Central Los Angeles where you can see the haze, you can hardly breathe, all the kids have asthma. I know that each tree gives oxygen. With global warming, factory emissions and all types of impurities in the air, it’s good to know that I’m giving something that combats that.

And it’s mind-blowing to know that I’m planting something that has the potential to outlive me and be around for hundreds of years. I know if more organizations had URI’s goal, the world would be a better place to live.

I wake up now having a positive objective every day. Cops drive past and give me the thumbs up. It’s great to get letters from people thanking me for making their neighborhood nicer. People smile when they walk by. It’s just a beautiful thing. I want to do more of what I’m doing now.

Thank you, URI, for allowing me to give back.

Community Greenspace Celebrates Milestones in Community Service

Our 50 Greenspace groups planted a total of 163 trees, 1105 perennials, 141 shrubs and had over 1,000 volunteers participate this summer!

This summer we also held two new exciting workshops. The first was a workshop given in Spanish in Fair Haven to discuss the different benefits of different trees supported by The Watershed Fund and the CT Dept. of Energy & Environmental Protection. The second new training was on how to install rain barrels and offered free barrels for participants through the generous support of the Greater New Haven Water Pollution Control Authority (GNHWPCA). Please check out the new instructional rain barrel videos on our website!

Community Greenspace held its annual end-of-the-season celebration at Lighthouse Point Park in September along with our partners at the Community Foundation for Greater New Haven, the City of New Haven and the New Haven Land Trust’s Community Gardening groups. Groups that have served five, ten and fifteen years or more with the program were recognized with a certificate. Recipients of the award are listed below.

GreenSpace groups with 15 or more years of service
• Friends of Chatham Square (18 years!)
• Arch Street
• East Edge

GreenSpace groups with 10 or more years of service
• Shepard Street
• Watson and Bassett
• Mechanic Street Mavens
• Oyster Point
• Atwater-Pine
• Crossroads
• Troup Group
• Newhall and Division
• Park on N nth
• Blockwatch #903
• Friends of Beaver Pond Park
• Bristol Street
• (Garden of Eden)
• Ivy Narrow B
• Lenzi Square
• Salmon Stail and Lloyd
• (Esmerelda’s Garden)
• Greenwich Ave
• Waeverly

GreenSpace groups with 5 or more years of service
• Bradley Street/Wooster Hill
• Cedar Hill
• Russo Park/Historic Wooster Square Association
• West River Association (Friends of Monitor Square)
• Little Nush
• Rainbow Park
• Bradley/Eld
• Wolcott and Lloyd
• Westville-Barnet and Willard
• Friends of East Rock Park
• Morris Cove Planters
• St. Roman Dog Park
• Peace Garden
• SOHL (South of Humphrey)

URI has published a new full-color Guide to New Haven Trees.

This spiral-bound book provides great tree identification tools and information on 91 species found in this fair city, including planting recommendations and addresses around the city of exemplary samples of almost every species.

This book can be yours with a $50 donation to URI. Please note preference of Spanish or English and send checks to: URI, 195 Prospect Street, New Haven, CT 06511.