Arbor Day Foundation

NC STATE UNIVERSITY College of Natural Resources

BLACK ENVIRONMENTAL PROSPERITY GROUP

ALLIANCE FOR COMMUNITY TREES DAY

PARTNERS IN COMMUNITY FORESTRY CONFERENCE 2026

Lincoln Larson & Sally D. Ross

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Equitable and Community-Centered Urban Tree Planting

A PRACTITIONER'S GUIDE



FOREST SERVICE U S DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

A Practitioner's Guide to Equitable Urban Greening

PRESENTED BY



LINCOLN LARSON

Professor

College of Natural Resources
NC State University

LRLarson@ncsu.edu
faculty.cnr.ncsu.edu/lincolnlarson/



SALLY D. ROSS

Founder & Principal Consultant

Black Environmental Prosperity Group (BEPG)

Blackenvtprosperity.com
bepgsolutions@gmail.com
@blackenvtprosperity

Agenda

01

The Challenge

02

Guiding Principles & Research Insights

03

Research to Practice

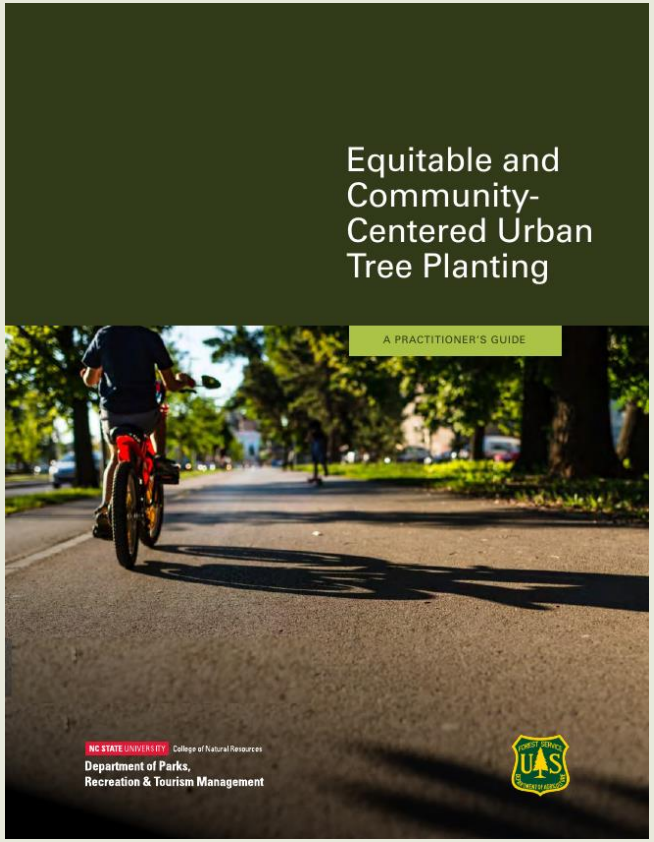
04

Key Takeaways & Resources

Learning Objectives

1. **Locate and access the Practitioner's Guide** to Equitable and Community-centered Urban Tree Planting
2. **Explain how inequities in tree planting emerge** and why they persist
3. **Describe key dimensions of environmental justice** and how each might be addressed in urban greening work
4. **Identify key recommendations for enhancing equitable urban greening** and develop specific actions linked to each strategy

Accessing the Practitioner's Guide



PRACTITIONER'S GUIDE · 2025

INSIDE THE GUIDE

Evidence-based recommendations

Practical tools for community engagement

Strategies for measuring stewardship success

SCAN TO ACCESS
the full guidebook and resources

Why Plant Trees in Cities?

Ecological Benefits

Health & Social Benefits

Economic Benefits

Despite these benefits, **trees may not be as welcomed by residents** as they are by the people and organizations who lead tree planting initiatives.

REASONS TO ACCEPT TREES

77%
BEAUTIFICATION (AESTHETIC VALUE)

43%
IMPROVE AIR QUALITY

37%
GENERATE SHADE (COOLING BENEFITS)

13%
PROVIDE WILDLIFE HABITAT

13%
INCREASE PROPERTY VALUE

9%
CREATE SENSE OF PRIVACY



REASONS TO REJECT TREES

32%
MAINTENANCE

24%
TOO MANY TREES ALREADY

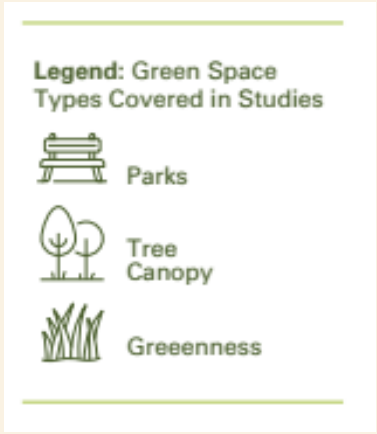
22%
NOT ENOUGH SPACE

19%
DON'T OWN THE HOUSE (RENTER OR MOVING)

7%
JUST DON'T LIKE TREES

7%
POSSIBLE PROPERTY/ SIDEWALK DAMAGE

Policies & Practices Contributing to Urban Tree & Greenspace Inequities



“Redlining” and “White Flight”

Discriminatory housing practices from the 1930s through the 1960s persist today, fueling segregation and disinvestment

Climate Justice

Growing impacts of climate change disproportionately affect certain populations, lead to social justice concerns; trees can help

Green Gentrification

Growth in natural amenities can inadvertently price people out of neighborhoods, displacing residents who need those natural amenities the most

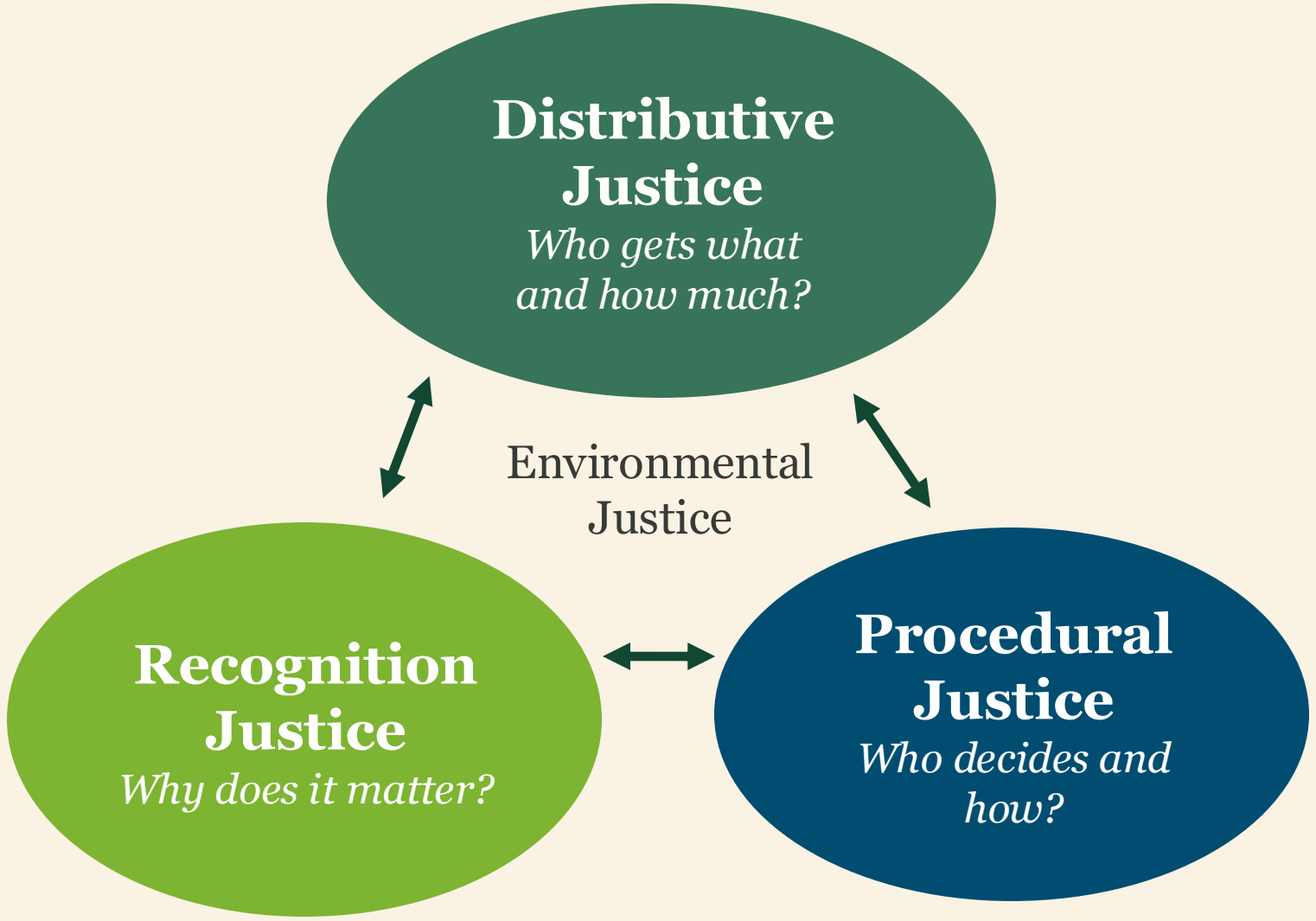


Environmental Justice

Distributive Justice: *Do communities have equal access to trees and the environmental services they provide?*

Recognition Justice: *Do people feel like they belong in a place? Are their values recognized?*

Procedural Justice: *Are all groups meaningful included and represented in decision making processes?*



Source: Pillars of Environmental Justice (Larson et al. 2025)

Equitable Urban Greening Study

From 2020 to 2023, our research team at NC State University collaborated with universities, government agencies, and NGOs across the U.S. to study challenges and opportunities related to equitable urban greening. **Most of the on-the-ground work took place in Louisville, KY**, with the Green Heart Louisville Project.

AIMS	METHODS
1. Synthesize current state of knowledge regarding public support for urban greening across diverse communities.	Literature review across disciplines
2. Identify factors associated with tree-planting program success.	Surveys of residents; Spatial analysis; National focus groups
3. Examine public perceptions of urban trees and relationships between trees, health, and neighborhood change.	Surveys of residents; Surveys and focus groups with community leaders; Social media data analysis
4. Define and share best practices to promote a national community of practice focused on equitable and inclusive urban greening.	National surveys and focus groups (NGOs, municipal arborists, federal/state forestry professionals, EJ groups)

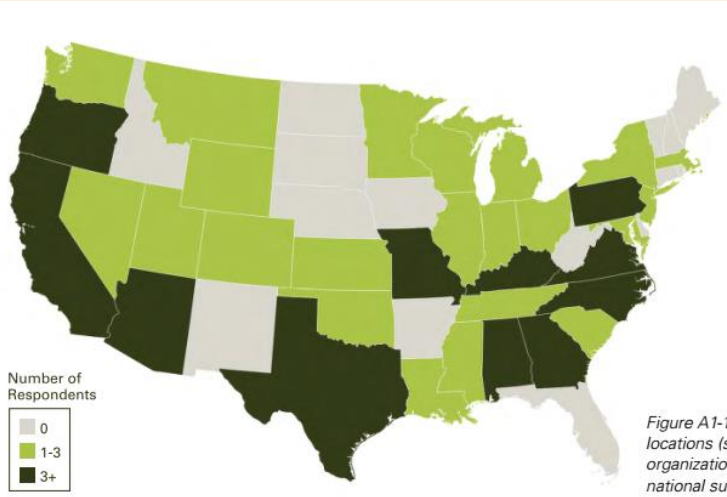
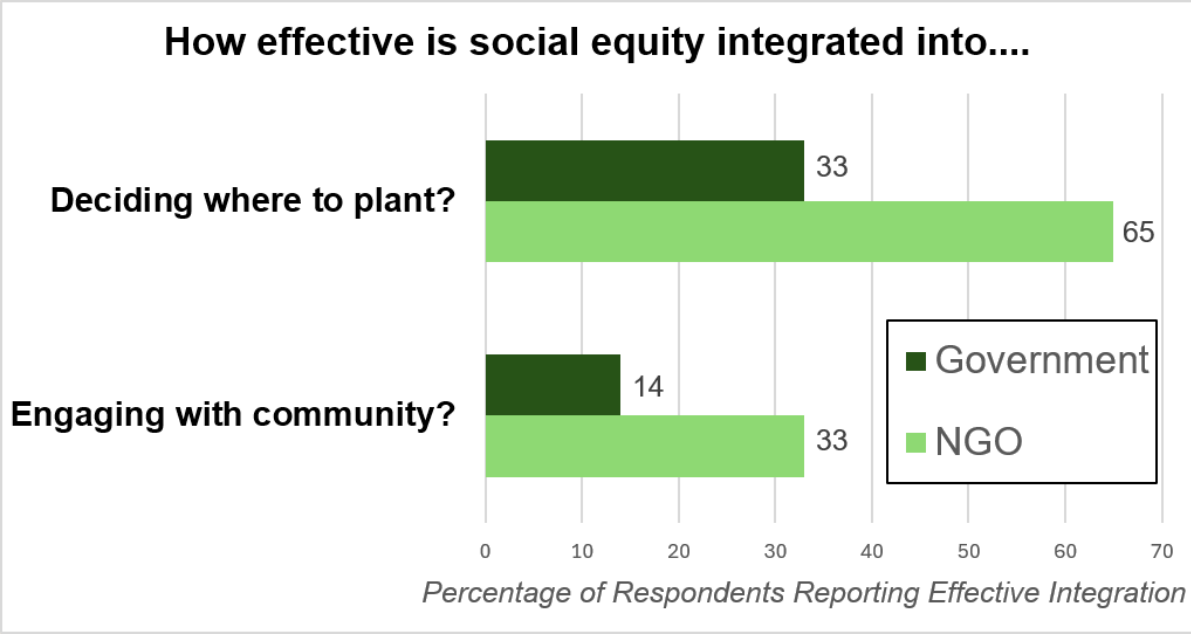


Figure A1-1. Map showing locations (states) of tree-planting organizations who participated in the national survey and focus groups.

Social Equity in Urban Greening?



Obstacle	Example Quote
Challenge of recruiting new participants	"If we don't have the people in the room to advise and speak for the themselves, we are at a loss."
Challenge of connecting with communities	"People don't necessarily want to believe the science associated with what trees can do. When you start talking about benefits, sometimes that goes in one ear and out the other."
Lack of adequate staff or volunteers	"We need more diversity and representation from the neighborhoods we serve."
Struggles with long-term tree stewardship	"One of the biggest obstacles is getting funders to understand that you have to build in the cost for maintenance and engagement. They think planting trees is it."

Recommendations to Maximize Social Equity in Tree Planting



01

Prioritize equitable tree planting in addition to efficient tree planting.



02

Seek community input and actively engage local residents in tree planting efforts.



03

Build trust with residents by intentionally documenting and integrating their values and needs related to trees.



04

Identify barriers to tree planting success and allocate or secure resources to overcome them.

Recommendations to Maximize Social Equity in Tree Planting



Create collaborative tree maintenance and stewardship programs with community partners to ensure tree survival and health in the long term.



Form partnerships with local governments, community organizations, non-profits, and businesses to plan, implement, and evaluate tree planting and stewardship efforts.



Continue to work with communities and monitor success – in terms of ecological and social outcomes – after trees are planted.

TREE EQUITY IN PRACTICE

From guiding principles to community-center action

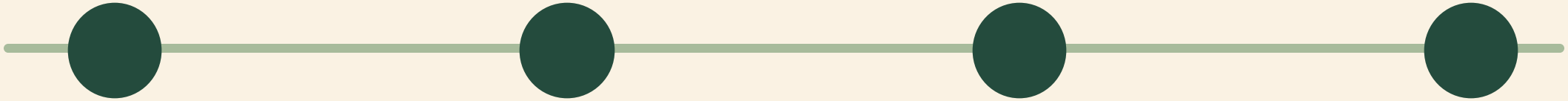


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FAIR FORESTS
CONSULTING
ROOTED IN COMMUNITY.
GROWING EQUITABLE FUTURES.

Building trust through community engagement

The guide calls for greening with communities—not simply within them.



LISTEN

Ask what residents value, need, and worry about.

RESPOND

Show what changes because of their input.

SHARE

Include residents in meaningful decisions.

RETURN

Stay involved after planting day.

Practical tools in the guide:
Neighborhood walks • Tree stories • Local advisory boards

Synthesis of guidebook recommendations 2, 3, 6, and 7 (pp. 15–21).

Removing barriers to successful greening

What changes when residents' concerns become program inputs?

PRACTICE SCENARIO

A neighborhood is offered 200 free trees.

Residents ask: Who will prune them? Who pays when a tree becomes hazardous?

HEAR THE CONCERN

Record resident priorities; do not assume lack of interest.

CHANGE THE PLAN

Build maintenance support, access, and realistic planting options.

SHARE RESPONSIBILITY

Partner with local groups, government, and funders for long-term care.

Illustrative scenario—not a documented 200-tree case. Guidebook recommendations 4–6 (pp. 16–19).

Measuring success beyond trees planted

Ecological outcomes and social outcomes belong on the same scorecard.

ECOLOGICAL OUTCOMES

Tree survival
Growth and canopy change
Maintenance needs

SOCIAL OUTCOMES

Resident satisfaction
Perceived benefits and burdens
Participation and long-term trust

Ask: Who benefited? Who had a voice? Who carries the responsibility after planting?

Guidebook recommendation 7 and research/practice questions (pp. 20–23).

Key Takeaways

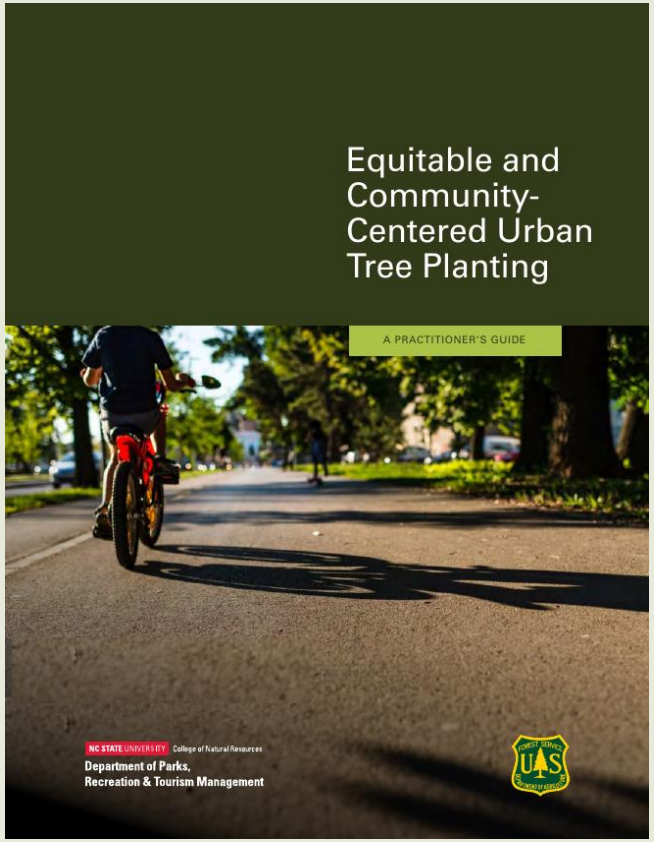
1. **Know your tree-planting context**, including local perceptions, needs, perceived barriers

2. **Use two-way communication**: share information with communities but also let their perspectives inform planning and decision-making

3. **Support long-term stewardship** through capacity-building and strategic partnerships and collaborations

4. **Measure success in different ways** including both ecological, social, and institutional outcomes

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Happy planting… and community engagement!

Lincoln Larson: LRLarson@ncsu.edu

Sally Ross: Bepgsolutions@gmail.com

With input from Christine Carmichael: christine@fairforests.com