

Yuma a 'tree city USA' for third time

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2010-03-01 17:31:25



In recognition of the community's commitment to urban forestry, Yuma has been named a Tree City USA for the third consecutive year by the Arbor Day Foundation.

"We commend Yuma's elected officials, volunteers and its citizens for providing vital care for its urban forest," John Rosenow, chief executive and founder of the Arbor Day Foundation, wrote in a letter to the mayor's office.

He continued: "Trees provide numerous environmental, economical and health benefits to millions of people each day, and we applaud communities that make planting and caring for trees a top priority."

The Tree City USA program is sponsored by the Arbor Day Foundation in cooperation with the National Association of State Foresters and the USDA Forest Service. To qualify as a Tree City USA community, Yuma had to meet four benchmarks: a tree board or department, a tree care ordinance, a comprehensive community forestry program and an Arbor Day observance and proclamation.

"We recognize the value of trees, not just for aesthetics, but for air quality and property values, and we will do what we can while we can to keep ours in the best possible condition," said City Administrator Mark Watson, alluding to cost-cutting measures the city has been undertaking during the economic downturn.

Yuma actually has a lot of trees, said Dave Faires, the city's urban forestry supervisor. "I hear a lot of 'Forestry in Yuma? We're in the desert!' But we have a lot of beautiful trees here."

He estimates that the city is responsible for some 20,000 trees in the parks, around buildings, along streets and in basins.

"We have beautiful parks," he said, "and trees, frankly, are what make them nice."

Faires said that urban forestry is a relatively new science - planting the right tree in the right place the right way, then managing and caring for the tree so it will be healthy and an asset.

Many of the trees in the city were planted by volunteers during tree planting events organized by the Parks and Recreation Department, noted Director Becky Chavez.

"Large scale community plantings have taken place in Smucker Park, Winsor Park and our largest tree planting project to date – the Millennium Tree Grove at West Wetlands Park, which occurred in 2000," she said.

The most recent event was the creation of a new pecan tree grove in West Wetlands Park. Pecan trees were planted by student volunteers from Pecan Grove Elementary School to create a habitat for squirrels, she said.

"Tree planting events are a wonderful opportunity for us to educate the public on proper tree planting techniques and the importance of trees to our environment," Chavez said.

Yuma also has an active Community Tree Board chaired by Stacey Bealmear, who is the urban horticulture agent with Yuma County Cooperative Extension.

She said the citizens' group is in the midst of planning this year's Arbor Day activities to take place April 29 at Gateway Park. As part of the event, schoolchildren will help plant several native species trees at the park.

The board also will help with the Tree and Landscape Expo to be held this fall, and will be offering training programs to educate tree workers and homeowners on the proper care and pruning of trees. One such bilingual session was held last fall.

"Our goal is healthy trees in Yuma," Bealmear said. And no more topped trees.

Some of the benefits trees provide in communities, according to the Arbor Day Foundation:

- Trees moderate climate, conserve water and provide habitat for wildlife.
- Trees in urban areas reduce the heat island effect caused by pavement and buildings.
- Properly placed trees can increase property values, and buildings in wooded areas rent more quickly with tenants staying longer.
- Leaves filter the air we breathe by removing dust and other particles.

The Arbor Day Foundation is a nonprofit environmental and education organization of nearly 1 million members. Its mission is to inspire people to plant, nurture and celebrate trees.

More on the foundation and its programs can be found at www.arborday.org. More information about Tree City USA can be found at www.arborday.org/TreeCityUSA.

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