Doing Our Part to Manage Tallahassee’s Urban Forest

Photo by David Copps: Public lands such as Lafayette Park are good inspiration for us to carefully manage our urban forest.

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One of the most appealing things about living in Tallahassee is the wonderful urban forest experience. The lush growth of hardwoods and pines enhances the quality of life in our community by providing cooling shade, wildlife habitat, and beautiful scenery. The larger forest is composed of many wooded patches of hundreds, if not thousands, of residential, commercial, and public properties throughout the city. The management and care of this precious resource then, is the responsibility of the entire community. Provided here are some practices for patches large and small that, collectively, will contribute to the long-term health of one of Florida’s great urban forests.

Reconsider the idea of maintaining turf grass under trees. Grass usually doesn’t grow well in the shade and mowing under trees tends to compact the soil making it harder for shallow feeder roots to do their job. When leaves fall, let them remain on the ground to build up a rich carpet of mulch. Over time, this organic layer will be broken down and incorporated into the ground by earthworms and other organisms. This creates loose, well-aerated soil and a sustainable source of nutrients for the trees. Well-mulched ground also serves as an excellent sponge, soaking up stormwater run-off and storing it for future use by thirsty trees.

Once the mulch is in place, the process of natural regeneration begins as seeds and roots, some of which have been dormant in the soil for many years, start to sprout. Fast growing native trees such as water oak, sweetgum, and black cherry form the first wave of pioneer species and pave the way for slower growing trees such as magnolia, beech and hornbeam. Invasive species including Chinese tallow, privet, and coral ardisia can come up so thickly that desirable trees and shrubs are crowded out. These should be eliminated while small and easily pulled. Desirable
groundcovers like partridgeberry, violets and panic grass tend to colonize fairly quickly once mowing stops and the mulch layer builds.

In an urban setting, natural regeneration probably won’t provide all of the desired plants. Local nurseries can supply a variety of species to achieve the desired multi-layered forest structure with canopy trees, understory trees, shrubs and groundcovers. More layers provide more feeding and nesting opportunities for songbirds and other wildlife.

Many animals require tree cavities in which to raise their young. The primary source of cavities is standing dead trees (snags). These should be preserved whenever possible. Dead trees that are hazardous can often be topped to fifteen or twenty feet. The remaining trunk is sure to attract a variety of woodpeckers and other insect-eating birds.

Public lands such as E.K. Phipps Park, Maclay Gardens and A.J. Henry Park are good places to observe the structure and composition of a healthy forest. Visit them for inspiration then come home and look for opportunities in your own yard and neighborhood to improve a patch of woodland. This kind of stewardship throughout the community will ensure that our beautiful urban forest will be enjoyed for generations to come.

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