

## NEWS

# Chicago planted 23,000 trees this year, with 8,600 going to neighborhoods with the highest need, officials say



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Growing up on Chicago's Southwest Side, Rolando Favela lived across from a factory. Loading docks were his playground, he said, whereas trees and green spaces seemed to only exist in other parts of the city.

Favela is now helping tackle this disparity as an environmental justice steward with the Southwest Collective. About seven volunteers from the nonprofit are tree ambassadors, part of the city's \$46 million Our Roots Chicago initiative.

"It's not just aesthetics — trees are pretty, but it's also flood alleviation, erosion control, stormwater management," he said. "This is a green infrastructure coming to the front of people's homes, which is great."

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The city is on track to meet its goal of planting 75,000 parkway trees by 2026, according to spokesperson Mimi Simon, a statistic environmental advocates think is a good start. Some also hope the city prioritizes tree maintenance, a concern they say neighbors often share with them.

With a 23% canopy cover, Chicago falls [far below](#) the national average. The city's half million street trees, those often found on the strip of grass between the street and sidewalk, make up a [part of the overall canopy coverage](#), along with trees in parks and yards.

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The city also planted significantly fewer trees in lower income communities of color on the South and West sides throughout the 2010s, a [Tribune investigation found](#), leaving residents at higher risk of excessive heat, flooding and poor air quality.

“Prioritizing tree care and planting improves air quality and creates healthier communities for Chicago, which is especially important in historically divested communities,” Mayor Brandon Johnson said in a news release.

### Finding ‘ideal’ spots

For volunteers from the 12 organizations in the tree ambassador program, run by the Chicago Department of Public Health and the Morton Arboretum’s Chicago Region Trees Initiative, reaching these communities is the main goal, said Trinity Pierce, a stewardship manager for the tree initiative

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They receive training on selecting prime tree planting locations — checking for utility boxes, overhead wires and fire hydrants — and conversing with property owners about receiving trees. They can then request trees through the CHI 311 app, which moves them toward the front of the line, Pierce said. Anyone can request a parkway tree through 311, although some have [complained in the past of slow response times](#).

Even though trees are resilient — some even grow out of cracks in the sidewalk — Pierce said tree ambassadors look for “ideal locations,” meaning there’s enough space for the roots. Some species can better handle road salt and pollution from cars on the street, while Pierce said others will thrive in park or community garden settings. On Chicago’s streets, Pierce said oaks, Kentucky coffeetree and honey locust are common.

“We have field days where we’re going out and we are walking block to block and maybe a resident is home, maybe they’re not,” Pierce said. “But we can leave a note, ‘please connect with us about this opportunity,’ and we’ve had some great conversations about how the neighborhood changed or how the trees on the block changed.”

Volunteers from the Southwest Collective, for example, will scour Google maps and walk the streets in order to identify areas lacking tree cover, Favela said. After being a part of the program for about a year, he said they’ve requested more than 700 trees, from Garfield Ridge to Archer Heights.

The Our Roots program identified priority areas for tree planting as the city expands its overall canopy coverage. On the Southwest Side, for instance, the city planted about 500 trees in Brighton Park, 200 in Archer Heights and 90 in Gage Park this year — three of its 22 priority spots.

Here are the number of trees planted in the city’s other priority areas, as of Nov. 28. Simon said she expects the numbers to increase as the city finishes compiling information.

1,183 in North Lawndale

1,017 in South Lawndale

783 in Auburn Gresham

478 in Greater Grand Crossing

434 in New City

409 in Washington Park

398 in West Garfield Park

373 in East Garfield Park

245 in West Englewood

225 in Chicago Lawn

152 in West Elsdon

112 in Fuller Park

79 in West Lawn

36 in Oakland

29 in Armour Square

23 in Riverdale


“It’s a start,” Bweza Itaagi said. “That number of trees is great and I can say for a fact, we have a lot of other areas that need more, but I am glad to see that it’s more of a priority to the city.”

### **Tree maintenance**

Itaagi coordinates the tree ambassador program at the nonprofit Grow Greater Englewood. When talking to Englewood residents, she said some are interested in planting more trees, but say they first want existing trees to be better maintained, from pruning to uprooting unhealthy ones.

One of the most challenging parts of the job, Favela added, is combating misconceptions, such as that trees will destroy plumbing or that they’re an “insurance claim waiting to happen.”

“It’s one thing to plant the trees and it’s another to make sure that the trees are well maintained, and it seems that the city is not yet equipped to fully maintain all of the

 Arturo Andrade unloads one of 26 aspen trees planted at the Englewood Plaza, Dec. 15, 2023.

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Chicago's trees are planted by Seven-D Construction Co., a vendor the city has [contracted for plantings since at least 2015](#). Seven-D's contract includes a two-year maintenance period for watering and pruning, Simon said. The city provides a door hanger when a tree is planted, Simon added, asking residents to water the tree on a weekly basis for the first year.

For long-term maintenance, she said the Department of Streets and Sanitation's Bureau of Forestry hired additional staff this year who developed an "area-trim approach," meaning crews schedule and trim all areas in one geographic area at the same time. This year, the city said it trimmed more than 90,000 parkway trees, a 173% increase from last year.

Pierce compared tree maintenance to raising children — the more people looking out for them, the better their odds of surviving. She said the first two to three years after planting is trees' "establishment period," when roots seek out water and nutrients below ground so they don't rely on humans watering them.

She said the CRTI asks tree ambassadors to check on trees in their communities periodically, adding that it's important to get to know the area around where trees are planted.

"It really helps just stick your finger or a shovel in like 3 inches down. If the soil is dry that tree needs water," Pierce said. "Even for older trees, we may think they are resilient and don't need as much support the older they get, but we know that trees still need care."

Overall, Itaagi said her experience with the tree ambassador program has been positive. She said Grow Greater Englewood was allocated \$50,000 over two years, which they've used to host two training events with about 30 people so far. Volunteers have requested about 70 trees, she said, and some told her they noticed that the trees were planted within a few weeks.

"Having access to the CHI 311 app and then being able to put these tree requests at the top of the priority list is such a benefit and really has drawn more people to be

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Our Roots Chicago also created a 115-member tree equity working group to help identify priority community areas and set long-term goals for expanding the tree canopy. At the monthly meetings, Tom Drebenstedt, a board member of Galewood Neighbors and a tree ambassador, said they also talk about issues such as tree maintenance.

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Drebenstedt said he'd go so far as to say trees are making people in Galewood happier. One of his neighbors was able to get seven trees planted in his parkway, which is the best example, he said.

"Trees are part of a cycle of carbon dioxide and oxygen. They provide shade, which reduces the heating of the city," he said. "They host insects and birds, and it's sort of reclaiming the environment."

*An earlier version of this story misstated the percentage increase of the number of trees the city trimmed this year compared to last year.*

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