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Trees' Beauty and Benefits

by DOMINIQUE DAVISON

Body Text: Trees have a multitude of benefits for our neighborhoods. Besides their beauty, trees provide shade that can lower electric and cooling bills for homes, clean the air, absorb storm water runoff and even help reduce stress. Mature, healthy trees boost property values, and let's not forget the wildlife they shelter.

March and April are ideal months to plant trees, giving them time to establish themselves before summer's heat sets in.

There are several important factors to consider, including the tree's placement in relation to overhead power lines and proximity to your home and other plants. Planting a tree correctly and its long-term maintenance are other things to think about. There are excellent resources online, such as the Heartland Tree Alliance, heartlandtreealliance.org, that can answer your questions.

One interesting statistic: It takes a tree roughly 20 to 25 years to mature to the point of providing more financial benefits to a community than are invested in initial planting and maintenance costs. This highlights the need to protect our healthy canopy. New construction is frequently a threat to existing trees, but there are ways to mitigate or avoid damage to them.

Start a remodeling or building project with a site walk to gather an inventory of the trees, a critical first step that is often ignored. Observing the site firsthand often raises awareness and appreciation for the natural resource of the existing trees and invariably makes for a better project.

Protection is the next vital step once the decision has been made to maintain a tree on a construction site. There are rules of thumb to use; protecting the ground around the tree from the drip line to the trunk from excavation or compression, for example.

However, the best bet is to have an experienced arborist give recommendations for how to protect the specific species. Some trees have more sensitive root systems than others. A critical root zone should be established for all the trees to be protected on site and a sturdy fence put in place.

Communication is key in any successful project, so let everyone on site know about the importance of the critical root zone. Most of the tree's roots are within 3 feet of the ground surface for access to air, water and nutrients, so avoid adding more soil on top of the protection zone.

Trees enhance the architecture when placed well so they can grow and mature healthily. I can't think of an example where I have seen a tree and thought, "Gosh, that building would be so much better if that tree weren't there." Rather, the space created by the trees can be so grand and powerful that the experience would be greatly diminished without them.

Trees have a financial benefit to a city, and this is an investment that should be handled with care. They absorb carbon dioxide and contribute to the public health of a community. I was delighted to see that the Kansas City Parks and Recreation Department is partnering with local neighborhood groups on tree-planting efforts throughout the city where residents can volunteer to have a tree planted in their medians.

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