Why Giveaway Trees?

In 2007, New York Restoration Project (NYRP) and New York City Department of Parks and Recreation entered into a public/private partnership, MillionTreesNYC, with a goal to plant one million trees throughout the five boroughs of NYC by 2017.

NYRP is responsible for planting 100,000 trees, focusing largely on privately owned property. High resolution land cover data for NYC (see MacFaden et al. 2012) indicates that the greatest untapped opportunity to increase urban canopy is on private land, and more specifically 1-2 family residential properties (O'Neil-Dunne, 2012). More than one-quarter of NYC total land area is classified as residential, an area equivalent to 62 times the size of Central Park (New York City Department of Planning, 2010). Urban foresters have been working for decades to address this geographically significant tract of land and have yet to develop effective solutions. Focusing on this challenge, NYRP pioneered a method for "planting the spaces in between" with our tree giveaway program.

Through the tree giveaway program, NYRP provides organizations between 100 and 300 trees and staff to support the distribution of trees to NYC residents for planting on private property. The giveaway events take place throughout NYC's five boroughs every weekend during the spring and fall planting seasons. Tree giveaways set the stage for discussions about urban soil conditions, precautions to take when planting, and ecological issues confronting the city. From Allegheny Serviceberry to Little Leaf Linden and everything in between, these trees provide a beneficial contrast to the gray infrastructure of the city. These benefits include providing shade, wildlife habitat, ecological biodiversity, storm water retention, food production, and natural beauty.

Who Participates?

Tree giveaway events are hosted by community organizations, schools, and environmental organizations. Organizations interested in participating typically apply electronically using an application posted at both http://www.nyrp.org/milliontreesnyc and www.milliontreeesnyc.org. Applicants are chosen based on their previous success with tree giveaways and new groups are picked based on demonstrated outreach effort, community presence, overall organization, as well as geographic location. The number of trees a group is awarded is based on demonstrated ability to effectively give away trees. All new groups are given 100 trees for their first event.

What Types of Trees?

Part of NYRP's mission is to support and raise awareness for NYC's ecological systems. We do this through direct planting projects as well as facilitating discussion about NYC's unique ecosystems.

Red-tailed hawks nest in Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn and hunt in Prospect Park, but there are few trees in between these two landscapes that offer appropriate perches. One of the ideas behind the tree giveaway program is to target densely populated residential neighborhoods between large tracts of green space like Greenwood Cemetery and Prospect Park. The trees we give away are not only beneficial to the homeowner because they help filter air and lower energy usage (Nowak, 1993; Akbari, 2002), but also to the red-tailed hawk population and countless other wildlife that live in NYC.

From our experience, large shade trees tend to take the longest to give away, while fruit trees and the smaller, well-known ornamental trees are the first to go. More research is needed to explore why shade trees seem to be a hard "sell" but experience points to the small size of the average NYC backyard. Moreover, planting on private property has taught us that even when people have the space for a tree, it is not always appropriate to fill the entire space with canopy because people may already be using that space for a vegetable garden or other plants that need sunlight.

For this particular program where we ask people to plant trees on their own property, it is very important to strike a balance between the homeowner's needs and preferences with the ecological needs of our city. Using these values to guide us, we recognize the opportunity to make significant changes in people's values and attitudes when it comes to trees; in doing so we are able to weave together a meaningful ecology for the city.

Working in NYC we like to give away what we call "subway sized" trees. Our trees all come in #7 gallon containers or smaller, most come in the #2-5 range. Our mix of species speaks to our multiple objectives with this program, ranging from native shade trees, to small ornamentals and fruit trees. In a typical season we will give away 50% small trees (10'- 25' at maturity), 20% medium trees (25'- 50' at maturity), 10% large trees (50'+ at maturity), and 20% fruit and/or nut trees. We try to stay away from the most commonly planted street trees in NYC to expand the plant diversity of the city. We feel this mix gives adopters a wide range of options, and gives us the opportunity to educate the public about the various benefits trees provide in the urban ecosystem, while meeting the unique constraints of this urban environment.

Process

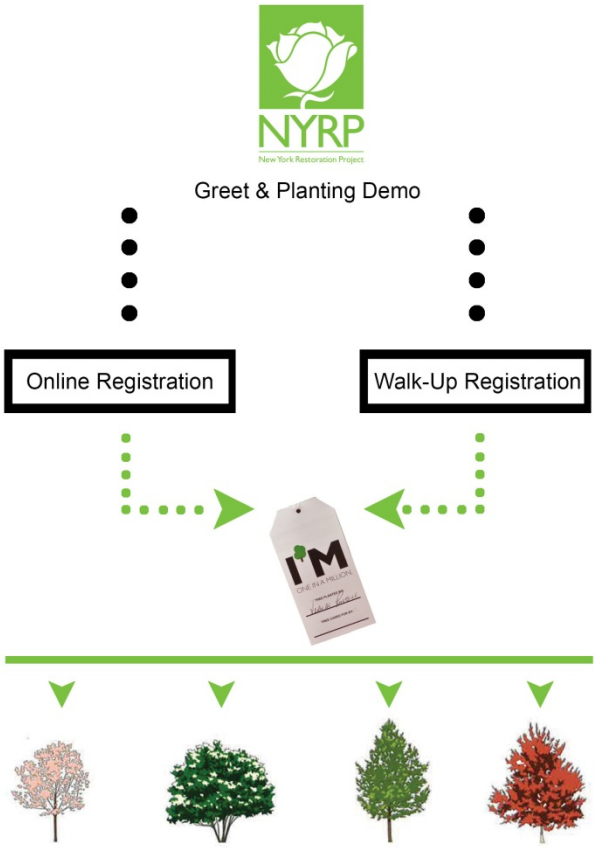
NYRP provides at least one staff for the tree delivery. This person's responsibility is to inspect the trees and to drop off the "event toolkit" with all of the materials needed for the giveaway, including NYRP banners, adoption sheets, planting and care handouts, and tree descriptions.

The day of the giveaway, NYRP provides two staff. Our giveaways are the perfect opportunity to tell a story about trees and tree care. One of the most important staff responsibilities is to deliver that educational message during the event.

One NYRP staff stands in front of the tables (where the NYRP logo is on the graphic below) and directs people to the appropriate line, makes announcements, gives a brief description of each tree and the soil and sun conditions it prefers, and does a brief tree planting demonstration. The second NYRP staff (where the MillionTreesNYC tree tag is on the graphic below) is in the secure tree area managing the four volunteers who move the trees. Sitting at the tables are another four volunteers – at least two assigned to the walk-up registration table, and two to the online registration table.

The locations of where the trees will be planted must be reported to MillionTreesNYC. For this reason we must keep accurate records at the giveaway events. Volunteers are required to fill out the adoption forms, as opposed to the adopters themselves, because of the importance of data capture.

In spring 2012 we introduced a new piece to our program: online registration. Online registration helps improve data integrity as all of the information is collected and cross-checked before the event. We never register more than 75% of the trees online, so at least 25% of the trees are available for walk-up registration at the event for those who are hearing about the event last minute or do not have access to a computer.



NYRP logo and MillionTreesNYC tree tag represent the two NYRP staff at the giveaway event.

Survey and Evaluation

With the help of NYC Parks, we created a survey to learn more about our adopters. We emailed the survey to everyone who had adopted a tree and provided us with an email address, approximately 2,500 individuals. We received over 140 responses. The results show that approximately 90% of respondents are homeowners, and typically range in age from 41 to 60. These results help us to understand the demographic characteristics of who we are serving and to assess how to better serve the community in the future with giveaway or other NYRP events.

In summer 2011 we conducted a preliminary survey of the survival of the trees distributed through the giveaway program. Of the trees we could find, the vast majority were still alive and healthy. Currently there is little research on survivability of urban trees planted on private property, with a few notable exceptions (Lu et al., 2010; Jack-Scott, 2012). In the coming years we hope to be able to move forward with a more cohesive evaluation that would help tell an important story about this crucial piece of NYC's urban forest.

Nearly 15,000 trees have been given away to NYC residents through NYRP's tree giveaway program. Over the duration of MillionTreesNYC that number is projected to double. This work is critical to the health of our city and to the well-being of its residents, from the private homeowner, to the child playing in the street, to the red-tailed hawk flying above.

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