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## My Tree NYC: Beautiful Tree Bed Contest – An Interactive Way to Celebrate Tree Care

Sarah Tobing

*Forestry, Horticulture and Natural Resources Group, City of New York Department of Parks and Recreation, sarah.tobing@parks.nyc.gov*

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## **My Tree NYC: Beautiful Tree Bed Contest – An Interactive Way to Celebrate Tree Care**

Over 625,000 street trees help transform the cold concrete of New York City into a lush and inviting living space. While over 7,000 New Yorkers have formally adopted these trees through a program developed by MillionTreesNYC that engages citizens in tree care, a greater number of people have informally adopted street trees through watering in the summer, gardening in tree beds, and installing tree guards. The goal of this project was to increase the visibility of tree care and tree bed beautification, while creating tree stewards through a fun new contest. My Tree NYC: Beautiful Tree Bed Contest was run through a social media platform where entrants could upload pictures of their tree beds and observers could vote on their favorite one. The contest was met with enthusiasm from the public; over 1,200 unique visitors looked at the campaign online during the 50 day period it was open.

### **Keywords**

tree bed, NYC, contest, urban forest

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## Introduction

Over 625,000 trees line New York City's streets, providing a myriad of benefits including carbon sequestration, aesthetic value, and stormwater capture (Nowak et al. 2007). In addition, trees transform the cold concrete of a typical NYC neighborhood into a lush and inviting living space. Street tree care has been shown to increase street tree survivability (Lu, J. et al. 2010).

Stewardship Corps is a program developed by MillionTreesNYC in order to engage citizens in tree care; participants can also formally adopt trees and track the volunteer hours on an interactive map on the [MillionTreesNYC website](#). Over 7,000 street trees have been formally adopted through MillionTreesNYC. However, a greater number of people have informally adopted street trees through watering in the summer, gardening in tree beds, and installing tree guards. The enthusiasm and creativity of these citizens should be recognized. The goal of this project was to increase the visibility of tree care and tree bed beautification while creating tree stewards in a fun new way and to provide a portfolio of tree bed plantings and tree guard designs.



A Beautified Tree Bed in New York City

## Tree Planting in New York City

In 2007 Mayor Michael Bloomberg unrolled [PlaNYC 2030](#), an unprecedented effort to prepare New York City for an additional one million residents by strengthening the city's economy, combating climate change, and enhancing the quality of life for all New Yorkers (City of New York 2007). PlaNYC initiatives encompass everything from transportation to tree planting and involve over 25 city agencies.

MillionTreesNYC is one of the initiatives and is a public-private partnership between the City of New York's Department of Parks and Recreation (Parks) and private partners. MillionTreesNYC commenced in 2007 with the completion date of 2017. During this time the city will plant 700,000 trees on public lands – including 220,000 larger 2.5-3" caliper trees on the right of way and 480,000 smaller, 2-gallon containerized trees within reforestation natural areas. Street trees planted in the right of way are planted by request of individuals through the City's [311 call system](#) or by [block planting prioritization](#) based on the population density per US Census blocks, the air pollution concentrations, and the tree canopy cover in each of the five boroughs (Morani et al. 2010). The planting of street trees is planned by Parks Central Forestry Staff and executed by private contractors. [Private partners](#) including the New York Restoration Project, community organizations, and homeowners will plant another 300,000 trees on private property.

MillionTreesNYC has the mission of not only planting trees but also teaching volunteers how to care for trees. [Stewardship Corps](#) was launched in 2009 in collaboration with private partners in order to build a community-based network of tree care volunteers. It provides tree care workshops and free toolkits, expansion of existing environmental and tree care programs across

the city, advanced tree care workshops for Tree Care Captains to become empowered and train new volunteers, and an online network for tree stewards including the [Adopt-a-Tree database](#).

## Methods

Planning for My Tree NYC Beautiful Tree Bed Contest began in spring of 2012. MillionTreesNYC and Central Forestry staff organized logistics and hired a summer intern to help manage the contest. We wanted tree stewards to be able to upload pictures of their tree beds online and tell us a little bit about their tree care activities. With the suggestion of Parks New Media division we decided to use [Offer Pop](#), a social media platform that runs as an application within Facebook, rather than building a new framework into the Parks website. The platform was [within the MillionTreesNYC Facebook](#) page to allow for easy linkage to other social media users. Offer Pop was paid for through a monthly subscription cost of \$50 for the first month and \$100 for the second month. (The cost increased because the number of Facebook users that “liked” the MillionTreesNYC page increased.) The platform allows for flexible settings and fill-in answer sections. It also provides real-time reporting and exporting of data and photos. Contestants could upload pictures to the platform from June 15 to August 3 and customize their comments below the picture. The intern reviewed each submission before it became visible online, in order to monitor the quality of the entries. Once the entry was approved, Facebook users could vote on their favorite submission up to one time per every 24 hours. There was a caveat on the sign in page that only tree beds that met Parks standards could qualify to enter; a link was provided to the TreeLC Handbook which outlines some dos and don'ts of tree care (Michie and Mackintosh 2009). Winners were selected by MillionTreesNYC and Central Forestry staff based on the number of votes they received and the overall quality of their tree bed.

Advertising was a critical part because it was the first time that the contest was administered. The contest logo was made by Parks Marketing design staff and a press release prepared. Announcements went in the MillionTreesNYC monthly newsletter and quarterly e-blast. Personal emails were sent to MillionTreesNYC Tree Care Captains and community contacts who had previously championed tree care on their blocks. Announcements were also sent to community boards, community bloggers, and professional associations. Advertising was also done through Twitter and Facebook updates.

Winners were selected in 9 categories. Each winner received a sign to place in their tree bed, a Home Depot gift card, and MillionTreesNYC promotional items such as a recycled plastic tote bag. The winners were also recognized at the annual MillionTreesNYC Volunteer Recognition Party at the Arsenal in Central Park on September 14, 2012.



## Results

The contest was met with enthusiasm from the public. Over 1,200 unique visitors looked at the campaign online. It was featured in the [Queens Ledger](#) and over a dozen community blogs. Some of the contestants advertised on social media and in blogs to increase their number of votes. There were nine winners and there was participation in all boroughs of New York City except Staten Island. There were 27 qualified entrants with the greatest number being from Brooklyn (13), followed by Manhattan (9), Queens (3), and the Bronx (2). Yuliya Chernova, the overall winner, had a total of 304 votes and was featured in [Sheepshead Bay Bites](#), an independent news blog. Contestants entered as individuals and community organizations. There were winners from diverse types of civic organizations ranging from block associations like, G.I.V.E. (Getting Involved, Virginia Ave Efforts) in the Bronx, to the Chinese Community Center of Flushing, to the Chelsea Garden Club.

### Winners for My Tree NYC: Beautiful Tree Bed Contest

Category	Winner
Most Beautiful Tree Bed in NYC	Yuliya Chernova
Best Group Work	Signe Mortensen from the West 150th Street and the Unify and Beautify Campaign
Best Tree Guard	Myrtle Avenue Brooklyn Partnership
Best Use of Color	Morningside Gardens Grounds Committee
Most Beautiful Tree Bed in Brooklyn	Robert Hickman
Most Beautiful Tree Bed in Manhattan	Luis Lujan from the Chelsea Garden Club
Most Beautiful Tree Bed in Queens	Chinese Community Center of Flushing
Most Beautiful Tree Bed in the Bronx	Nilka Martell from G.I.V.E. (Getting Involved, Virginia Ave Efforts), Inc.
Most Creative	Laura Keith

Though there was positive feedback from the public, there were some barriers of entry to the contest. For example, because the campaign was completely social-media based and was open for a limited time, not all potential stewards were engaged. Facebook is not for everyone. We had at least one entrant sign up for Facebook in order to enter the contest. Offer Pop requires that entrants upload the application onto their Facebook page, posing a hurdle for people who do not want to add that kind of content to their pages. The contest was only open for 50 days and there was only a week of advertising before entrants could submit picture.

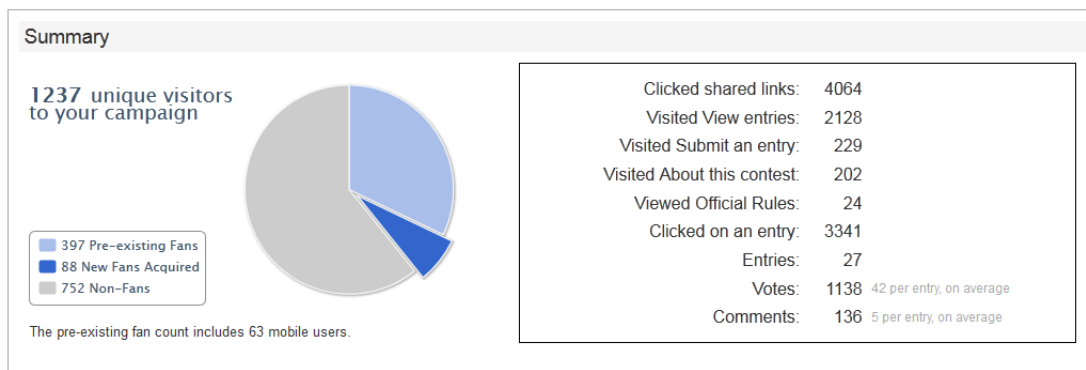
There were a handful of entries that did not qualify for the contest because they did not meet Parks recommended standards for tree care and included volcano mulch, tree guards that prevented water from entering the tree bed, etc. Each of the entrants was personally contacted, thanked for entering, and instructed on how they could improve their tree bed to comply with city codes and qualify for the contest.

Though there were some drawbacks to having a social media based contest, Offer Pop was a successful interface for Parks staff. Real-time tracking was made easy through the platform's built-in reporting system. This reporting system specifies the number of visitors that have viewed

aspects of the campaign such as the official rules and entries. It also shows the total number of entries, votes, and comments for the campaign.

During the first weeks of the campaign, visitors had to "like" the MillionTreesNYC Facebook page in order to vote for contestants and enter the contest. This requirement was waived. The summary report indicated that there were 752 unique visitors to the campaign that were not fans of MillionTreesNYC on Facebook, this indicates that participation would have been limited if we had not waived the requirement to "like" the MillionTreesNYC Facebook page.

#### Data Reporting Summary Produced by Offer Pop for My Tree NYC: Beautiful Tree Bed Contest



### Lessons Learned

Ideally, contestants would be knowledgeable about the contest year-round through buzz created from previous contests. This way stewards could be planning their tree beds and getting inspiration from previous winners far in advance. The majority of entries were from Brooklyn and Manhattan. If the contest is replicated, outreach and advertising should be done in Queens, Staten Island, and the Bronx.

The time allotted for advertising should be increased to gain more participation. The 50 day open period for submissions was too short. Many entries were made within the last two weeks that the contest was open. In the future, the contest could be open the entire spring and summer. This would allow for more entries. However, a potential drawback is that staff would have to check submissions regularly and the monthly subscription cost of the platform can get to be expensive. Offer Pop charges a monthly subscription fee depending on how many fans "like" your Facebook page.

Advantages of using Offer Pop included the ease of use and built-in reporting systems. It would have taken significant staff time for building a platform for photo entries within the Parks website and would have been much more costly than the Offer Pop monthly fees. However, if the contest runs next year, we will research new technologies while keeping cost of subscriptions in mind in order to maximize performance. An optimal platform for this type of campaign has the ability to format the user interface within your page. While having the contest run through a Facebook platform was a barrier to entry for some people, overall it was the best method because it was easy to set up in a short amount of time.

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