

Plants Bring Communities Together: The Benefits of Human-Plant Interactions

By Dr. Charles R. Hall

Ellison Chair in International Floriculture
Texas A&M University
Department of Horticultural Sciences

In today's challenging economic climate, community leaders are seeking new ways to attract and retain citizens, develop prosperous economies, add intellectual capital, and create jobs. The drivers that create emotional bonds between people and their community are consistent in virtually every city and can be reduced to just a few categories. Interestingly, the usual suspects — jobs, the economy, and safety — are not among the top drivers. Rather, people consistently give higher ratings for elements that relate directly to their daily quality of life including such things as an area's physical beauty, opportunities for socializing, and a community's perceived level of openness to all people.

Each of the known quality of life dimensions (usually defined as social, physical, psychological, cognitive, spiritual, and environmental well-being) are impacted by various stimuli, but remarkably, all of them are impacted in one way or another by the efforts that communities put forth in ensuring green spaces and managed landscapes (comprised of flowers, shrubs, trees, and turfgrass) remain a vital part of their local infrastructure. In other words, plants provide multiple benefits to communities in terms of local economic contributions, various environmental amenities (ecosystems services), and human health and well-being paybacks.

For example, some of the economic benefits of green spaces, parks, and other managed municipal landscapes are that the beautification of these areas draws customers to shopping districts, reduces shopper stress while they are there, enhances overall curb appeal for local businesses, boosts apartment and commercial building occupancy rates, increases revenue from tourism, creates local jobs (from various landscape design, installation, and maintenance activities), increases residential and commercial property values, and even reduces the costs of street repairs from the reduced temperatures resulting from shaded roadways and sidewalks.

While the list of environmental amenities, otherwise known as ecosystems services, is quite exhaustive, it is impressive to consider a mere subset of them such as the carbon that is sequestered, oxygen that is generated, wildlife that is attracted, biodiversity that is enhanced, the heat islands that are offset, the air, noise and glare pollution that is reduced, soil erosion that is mitigated, storm water runoff that is more efficiently handled, wind damage that is minimized, and the reductions in energy use that arises from the temperature buffering that plants provide around buildings. Needless to say, many of these environmental amenities translate into substantial economic contributions to local economies as well.

While these economic and environmental benefits may not come as much a surprise, the plethora of health and well-being benefits might. Peer-reviewed research has documented a person's ability to concentrate in their work environment when it is enhanced by the presence of plants and flowers. Children learn faster and are less distracted in plant-filled environs as well, and plants have even been documented to reduce stress levels, hypertension, and ease the effects of attention deficit disorder. Any person who has given/received flowers or plants as gifts knows the joy and excitement they generate; these powerful emotions carry over to beautified landscapes as well.

Parks, botanic gardens, and other urban green spaces favorably impact people's health (and reduce health care costs) by providing them with an inexpensive and convenient recreational service. Another health-related benefit is derived from the accelerated healing that occurs during hospital recovery periods when patients are exposed to flower and potted plants in their rooms, but as importantly, when they have views of beautiful landscape areas around the hospital.

Communities that choose to clean up their parks and beautify crime-ridden neighborhoods find that doing so lowers crime rates. Beautification efforts can positively affect the community by reducing vandalism and other criminal acts and brings residents together. Cohesion in the community is critical to the success of the community as a whole, and this unifying effect can be achieved through the common use of parks, greenways, botanic gardens, or other improved landscape areas.

However, the wealth of benefits provided by plants is not knowledge ingrained in modern day American culture. Humans often have difficulty in even seeing plants in their own environment, much less connecting plants to tangible benefits. For most people, plants are a part of the subconscious sector of mental life, perceived as the backdrop, not the main actors in the playing out of our everyday lives. Further research and widespread education—especially of city planners and local governments—may serve as the best tool for helping us recognize the advantages of beautified green spaces, thus the critical need for this Best Ideas book. As Henry David Thoreau once claimed – a remedy we can never have enough of is a healthy dose of nature.

If you would like to learn more about these and other plant-related benefits, please visit the “Benefits of Plants” resource area of AIB’s website (go to www.americainbloom.org, then click on Community Resources and then Benefit of Plants).