



# Charleston Urban Renewal

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**F**or years, many of us in the “green industry” have tried to quantify the value of trees. We felt that if we could accurately and scientifically place a dollar value on trees, we could convince others of what we had always felt was true; that healthy trees contribute to society. Recent studies by the USDA Forest Service have been successful in quantifying the dollar value of community street trees. The City of Charleston, S.C. was chosen as a prototype city by the Forest Service for such a study. It was determined that for every \$1.00 spent by the city on tree planting and maintenance, the citizens received \$1.35 in return in energy savings, stormwater mitigation carbon sequestration and more. This return on the taxpayers’ dollar is remarkable.



In addition to the monetary value, trees offer great sociological and psychological benefits as well. Studies published in the International Society of Arboriculture Journal of Arboriculture indicate that trees aid in crime reduction. When large shade trees are placed in a pleasing landscape, people tend to congregate in those spaces. Increased usage of the spaces produces many more watchful eyes that can deter crime. This is a primary tenet of “community policing”.



The City of Charleston has recently put this theory into practice. In an economically depressed part of downtown is a street habituated by drug dealers. City police are making advances in their battle against these criminals but the many good people of the neighborhood asked for more help. With a grant from the Home Depot Foundation, the City’s Urban Forestry Division planted over 30 Bosque elm, Crape myrtle and Sabel palmetto street trees along the four block street. Approximately 100 other trees were planted throughout the neighborhood.



As we planted the four blocks, residents came out of their houses and thanked City crews for the positive addition to the neighborhood. The residents, of course, appreciate the shade and cooling that will make their lives more bearable during a hot, humid Charleston summer. They also feel that the beauty the trees have will bring a sense of civility to the area. This, coupled with their increased use of the public space, will hopefully convince the drug dealers to move to another location.



In another study published in the *Journal of Arboriculture*, following Hurricane Hugo, Charlestonians were asked what damage caused them the deepest sense of loss. More than the damage to our historic architecture, more than damage to personal homes, the people of Charleston overwhelmingly replied that they most missed the destroyed trees. Trees had become landmarks for life. "I knew to always turn right past the large Live Oak" or "My grandfather planted that tree in front of the family home" were some of the replies.

Properly planted trees can provide a sense of place and identity. Neighborhoods utilize tree plantings to unify their streets and promote distinction from other neighborhoods. The stronger and more vocal neighborhood associations in Charleston are the biggest proponents of street tree planting. Well cared for neighborhood trees reflect civic pride.

As our communities become more urbanized, we necessarily install more infrastructures of concrete, asphalt and metal. Trees offer society a buffer and respite from the harshness of our built environment. Trees reduce the urban scale to more human dimensions making us calmer and more able to make positive decisions. Recent studies at Clemson University support this theory.



It is difficult to imagine Charleston or any other beautiful community without trees being a part of that image. Trees are woven into the fabric of a community along with its people its buildings and its customs.