

Miami's tree deficit is a disgrace, but you can help



The heat from recession is something you can see and feel in Miami. Concrete sizzles as today's era of hyper construction across the greater Miami metropolitan area has created a huge deficit that will take decades to correct. Things are overheated and undershaded.

I'm talking about the tree canopy, of course. It has receded to the point that we are overexposed on our sidewalks and devoid of shade in our neighborhoods. Although some may consider us a lush, tropical paradise, urban Miami is actually one of the most denuded areas in the nation.

Whereas most cities in the U.S. average a 30-percent canopy of trees, we have less than 10 percent. That gap places us well, well below average, and into the dunce corner. The recommended coverage for cities, according to the organization American Forests, is 40 percent.

Our bare situation was not caused overnight by hurricanes but by urban sprawl. Slash-and-burn development ripped out natural growth and, as the song says, paved over paradise. A few areas in the county -- from Coconut Grove south through Coral Gables, South Miami, and Pinecrest -- have fared somewhat better, but from downtown north, hardly a fig leaf stands to cover us.

Some places barely register any shade at all. Few people realize that the City of Hialeah is the densest city in the nation without a skyscraper, and its series of strip malls stretch endlessly. Even denser still is Little Havana, where a majority of the children do not live near a park or other outdoor safe space. These children, and many others across northern Miami-Dade County, have few places to stretch their legs or climb a tree. Their jungle is made only of concrete.

Helping to reverse this situation is the volunteer organization TREEmendous Miami, which plants trees feverishly. Miami-Dade County offers free trees through its successful Adopt-a-Tree program that rotates giveaways around the county. Meanwhile the City of Miami has spelled out its goals in an ambitious Tree Master Plan, including the long-term mark of reclaiming a 30-percent tree canopy. But it will be very hard to recover what we've lost.

Too Much Heat, Not Enough Shade

Written by Jim W. Harper - Last Updated Thursday, 02 October 2008 00:41

Why do we need more trees? “The biggest reason is that trees create better neighborhoods. They raise property values,” says Edith McClintock, executive director of the Miami nonprofit Dream in Green and an editor of the city’s Tree Master Plan. She also explains that trees reduce the “urban heat island effect” whereby concrete areas are much hotter than equivalent natural, green areas.

Trees and green space in general are major considerations for a city’s quality of life. Sadly, the City of Miami has one of the worst records for green space. The Trust for Public Land notes that our per capita acreage of parkland is lower than every other large city in the nation -- lower than Chicago, less than New York. Instead of parks and trees, we have parking spaces.

Of course, it is noteworthy that Miami has consistently been ranked as one of the poorest cities in the nation, and poor people are more consumed with putting food on the table than planting trees in abandoned lots. But the urban poor should not be consigned to living in the heat of an asphalt parking lot. Everyone, everywhere needs and deserves to have trees.

One place suffering the plague of treelessness much more than Miami is Haiti, and Miami-based Operation Greenleaves is trying to address the problem in both places. In Haiti, the lack of trees on hillsides creates the deadly situation of mud slides during heavy rains, and this problem must be reversed. In Miami, more trees would keep our waterways cleaner by reducing runoff. The two places are already connected culturally. It would be magical if they could work together to restore trees and save lives.

There is nothing lovelier than a tree and nothing more valuable. While priceless in theory, trees in Miami actually do have a price tag: \$1000 to plant and establish each new tree. With a goal of planting 10,000 new trees annually for the next ten years, the city will spend \$100 million for something that Mother Nature provides for free.

Citizens will need to make the difference. Plant a tree for a baby. Plant a tree for a birthday. Give a tree to your local school or place of worship. Don’t remove a tree to build a shed; build around it.

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The local economy also needs more leaves. Studies show that trees increase foot traffic in commercial areas. Their shade can also reduce air-conditioning bills and counteract the heat absorbed by concrete. In a flood, they are a form of insurance that can spell the difference between life and death.

Money may not grow on trees, but life does. In these divisive times, here is an issue that everyone can agree upon and participate in. Give Miami more trees, and they will give you back a surplus of cool shade and pure joy.

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