

Forest starts with a sea of saplings

Volunteers planted thousands of young trees along Little Sugar Creek to improve air and water quality.

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Nearly 2,300 plastic tubes have popped up like pins on a pin cushion along Little Sugar Creek in Charlotte's Belmont neighborhood.

The sight of so many plant supports is a sign something important is taking shape in this stretch of floodplain between Parkwood and Belmont avenues just east of uptown.

And what could be more important than protecting the water we drink and the air we breathe?

Several local agencies worked together through a program called Creek ReLeaf to bring the 15 varieties of trees to Belmont.

The tulip poplars, viburnums, witch hazels, elderberry and other trees planted by more than 400 volunteers in November are expected to reduce the pollution that ends up in the creek. The trees also help improve air quality.

To really make an impact, it takes lots of trees planted fairly close together. For now, the plastic tubes act as little greenhouses, protecting the small trees from harsh weather and hungry wildlife.

"Our goal is to establish a natural forested area," said David Kroening, project manager for Charlotte-Mecklenburg Storm Water Services. "It's not intended to be a lawn setting."

Plantings such as this are possible because of a partnership between Storm Water Services, the Charlotte Public Tree Fund, the Center for Sustainability at Central Piedmont Community College, the Sierra Club Central Piedmont Group and hundreds of volunteers and financial supporters.

The goal is to replace some of the tree canopy that has disappeared because of years of urban development.

Between 1985 and 2008, Mecklenburg County lost 33 percent of its tree canopy and saw paved and developed areas grow by 60 percent, according to a study by American Forests Inc.

Through Creek ReLeaf, supporters are working to plant a minimum of 3 acres of floodplain per year using native trees.

A tree's roots absorb pollutants in stormwater, reduce erosion and slow the water's movement during heavy rains.

Trees also absorb carbon dioxide and release oxygen, reducing the production of ozone.

Creek ReLeaf sends out volunteers for one large-scale project a year. Volunteers also have worked in Huntersville to add trees along Torrence Creek Greenway.

This year's project, along 4.5 acres near Little Sugar Creek, is the nonprofit's first in an urban area, Kroening said.

Volunteers planted 280 trees on creek banks between Morehead Street and Pearl Park Way before starting work beside the creek in Belmont.

Mecklenburg County began buying about 25 creekside residential properties in Belmont in 2000. Many of the homes had been damaged by floods.

Little Sugar Creek Greenway now stands in place of those homes and replaces some of the green space that became densely populated over the years.

The urban project proved more challenging than earlier ones. Planners had to coordinate with other agencies, including Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation, which owns the greenway, and Duke Power, which has transmission lines overhead.

There were other obstacles, as well. The ground was so hard that volunteers struggled to dig holes big enough even for saplings. But they managed, and they collected an important payoff when they had finished, Kroening said. "The neighborhood really embraced it," he said.

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