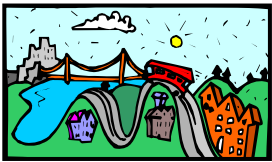# What is an Urban Forest?

The San Francisco Forest

San Francisco is a beautiful city to live in, famous for its Victorian houses, the Pyramid Building and the Golden Gate Bridge. But did you know San Francisco contains a beautiful forest as well? San Francisco's forest is an **urban forest** and is made up of all the trees and other **vegetation,** or plants, found throughout the city. In addition to trees in our parks and back yards, there are about 100,000 trees along our streets. That may sound like a lot of street trees, but actually there is space for twice as many!

A Breath of Fresh Air
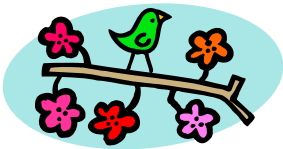
Besides looking nice, trees provide many benefits we enjoy today and will enjoy in the future. They provide homes, or **habitat,** for animals like birds, including migrating songbirds that fly south for the winter. With their wide reaching branches and plentiful leaves, trees are able to block loud city noises like fire engine sirens and cars. And, each time you inhale a breath of fresh air, you can thank a tree! That's because trees **absorb,** or take in, **polluted air** or dirty air, and create fresh air in return. Trees also help bring people together by making beautiful outdoor public space.

The Planet's Air Conditioner

Have you ever felt cool when sitting under a tree on a hot summer day? The shade from trees not only keeps us cool, it helps cool the entire city too. On a global level, trees around the world help keep the planet from getting too warm. As a matter of fact, trees and the forests that contain them, act like the planet's air conditioning system and help stop **global warming**.

Tree Power
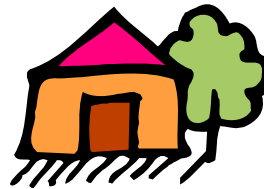
Trees can also help save energy. By blocking cold winds in the wintertime and offering cool shade in the summertime, a properly placed tree reduces the amount of time people use their heater or air conditioner. Another reason people like city trees is that they make our homes look nice. Often a house will sell for more money if there are beautiful trees in front. Not only that, but city trees also prevent flooding. When it rains, trees absorb rainwater and help stop flooding in our streets. If there were no trees in our city, it would flood every time a heavy rain fell!

Native Californians

Thousands of years before the urban forest, trolley cars and the Golden Gate Bridge, the place we know as San Francisco had sand dunes and wetlands, and was home to animals of all kinds. Plants that lived here originally are called native plants. They evolved here over thousands of years and created a complex and healthy ecosystem in which the native or indigenous peoples living here could find everything they needed to survive. Local California Indian tribes like the Ohlone people have lived in the San Francisco Bay Area for

thousands of years. Before towns were built and the Ohlones were forced to move, they hunted, fished, and gathered a wide variety of plants for food, medicine and basket weaving. One of the staples or main items of food they relied upon came from acorns. Acorn nuts were harvested from Oak trees and cooked into a porridge. The California Coast Live Oak trees that helped feed the Ohlone people can still be found throughout the city.

Fruit Trees in the City
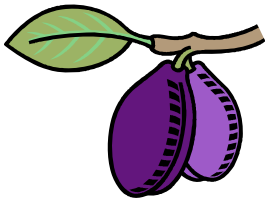
While most of us do not eat acorns from oak trees, we do rely on fruiting trees for food when we eat almonds or apples. Some fruit trees that grow well in San Francisco's warmer neighborhoods are: fig, lemon, pineapple guava, carob, avocado and plum. Other fruit trees like papaya and mango cannot grow in San Francisco at all because it does not get hot enough for their fruit to grow. There are many different kinds, or **varieties,** of the same type of fruit and some varieties will do better in our city than others. Also, in San Francisco, fruit trees can only be planted in people's yards, not as street trees.

The Right Tree for the Right Spot

Trees, just like all living things, need to be cared for. This starts with choosing the right tree for the right location. Some trees need more sun, some need more shade. Some like a lot of water, some like a little. Others do well with **humidity** or moisture in the air, while some trees need it to be dry. Trees also need space to grow. Bigger trees should be planted in our backyards and parks because

trees planted on our streets should not grow too big. If they do, they can interfere with power lines and telephone poles. Big trees can even grow big roots that push up sidewalks, causing problems. When choosing the right tree for the right spot, be sure to talk to an expert at your local **nursery,** or plant store,. They will help you pick the best tree.

Caring for Our Trees
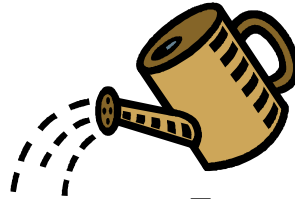
When trees are young they need extra care. They must be held up or **staked** for support and watered a lot before they grow their deep roots. Even when they grow up most trees need extra water during hot, dry summers. Sometimes trees need to be cut in a certain way that helps them stay healthy or bear more fruit. This is called **pruning**. Cutting too many branches however, or over pruning can be very harmful to a tree. If someone cuts more than a quarter or 25% of a tree's branches, it is called **topping**. Topping really hurts trees. It can starve and kill trees. Topping is so bad for trees that it is against the law in San Francisco!

Trees Have Rights Too!

Here in San Francisco trees are protected by the law, by citizens like you, and by organizations like **Friends of the Urban Forest**, and city agencies like the **Department of Public Works**. If someone wants to cut down a street tree they must apply and pay for a permit. They must also replace the tree they removed with another. There is also a program that will help turn certain trees into **landmark trees** or trees that can never be harmed. To learn more, contact **Friends of the Urban Forest** at (415) 561-6890.