
Division of Forestry offers grants to help plant trees

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By Kelly Sullivan

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The Alaska Division of Forestry is helping communities spruce up with woody perennials.

The Alaska Community Forestry Program has designated two grants for organizations and individuals interested in planting ornamental or fruit-bearing trees, common or species new to the state, in parks, backyards and spaces in between. Expected yields include improved soil composition, the possible introduction of successful new varieties into the region and assisting conservation efforts in Alaska.

“We have made an immediate mistake at looking at trees as solely aesthetic,” said Nan Mundy, representative for the forestry program. Mundy is overseeing approval of the Arbor Day Grants, which are for events that observe the 50th anniversary of Arbor Day in Alaska on May 16.

The history of Alaska’s holiday is a funny one, Mundy said. As of 1966, it was the only state in the Union that had not officially recognized Arbor Day, she said. In fact, it was a determined group of fourth-graders on Kodiak Island that convinced Gov. Bill Egan to sign the day into law.

“The grown-ups dropped the ball, but kids saved the day,” Mundy wrote in an email.

That same year, the Juneau Garden Club and U.S. Forest Service planted a tree for “every one of those Kodiak fourth-graders who got things started,” she wrote.

Mundy suggested a few other ways to observe the day like taking a trip to the library, painting or sculpting a favorite tree, finding the oldest or tallest tree in the neighborhood, making tree- or leaf-shaped cookies, and overall, sharing knowledge with others.

“One of the interesting things about Arbor Day, is that most holidays honor the past – this holiday really honors the future,” Mundy said.

Anyone that applies for the Arbor Day grants can also apply for the Community Orchard and Food Forest Grants, which promote some experimentation with fruit trees.

Patricia Joyner, community forestry program coordinator, who is overseeing the food grants, said the division is hoping to educate the public on orchard management practices, ultimately encouraging people a hand in growing their own food.

“People are really interested in adding that to their gardening palette, I think,” Joyner said.

Fruit trees have much more value than just providing nutrition, Joyner said. They help control storm water and flooding, common in the central Kenai Peninsula area, which is why the City of Soldotna took advantage of forestry grants in 2014, she said.

Shrubs and trees were planted in Soldotna Creek Park to restore contaminated earth and reduce runoff into the creek and Kenai River, Joyner said. The chosen varieties also added diversity to the park’s plant life and are being monitored for how well they thrive, she said.

“I think we really don’t know until we try them, because some of them do well outside of their typical range,” Joyner said.

Red and burr oaks, both non-natives to the area, were introduced, and are doing well, she said.

Joyner said there is little risk of trees becoming invasive species, and they bring with them very few pests.

Joyner and Mundy are taking an email-focused approach to getting the word out about the grant money, and are contacting organizations through out the state that may have an interest in picking out some new trees for local lawns, public and private.

Heidi Chay at the Kenai Soil and Water Conservation District has been promoting the grants locally, and said “Kenai Peninsula Food Bank, Soldotna Elementary and Soldotna Montessori and Sterling El are all mulling projects.”

Joyner and Mundy said they haven’t had too many bites just yet, but there is nearly \$7,000 available between in the two grants, and if there is enough interest, more may be made available in the future.

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