

# Natural Parks

Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources has created a very helpful manual on “Creating Sustainable Community Parks.” In an effort to expand the value of this report to park planners and staff, *Designing With Natives* is providing additional material on site analysis, plant selection, habitat creation, ways to reduce maintenance, ways to enhance natural beauty and creating gardens for residents to copy.

Parks are the life blood of many communities’ quality of life, and health. Urban, suburban and rural parks and open space improve our physical and psychological health, strengthen our communities, and make our and neighborhoods more attractive places to live and work.

Access to parks encourages people to exercise more. Physical activity has been shown to increase health and reduce the risk of a wide range of diseases, including heart disease, hypertension, colon cancer and diabetes. Physical activity also relieves symptoms of depression and anxiety, improves mood, and enhances psychological well-being. Beyond the benefits of exercise, a growing body of research shows that contact with the natural world improves physical and psychological health. 6

A number of studies have shown that parks and open space increase the value of neighboring residential property. Growing evidence points to a similar benefit for commercial property value. The availability of park and recreation facilities is an important quality-of-life factor for corporations choosing where to locate facilities and for well-educated individuals choosing a place to live.

Green space provides substantial environmental benefits. Trees reduce air pollution and water pollution, they help keep cities cooler, and they are a more effective and less expensive way to manage stormwater runoff than building systems of concrete sewers and drainage ditches. Parks also produce important social and community benefits. They make inner-city neighborhoods more livable; they offer recreational opportunities for at-risk youth, low-income children, and low-income families; and they provide places in low-income neighborhoods where people can feel a sense of community. Access to public parks and recreational facilities has been strongly linked to reductions in crime and in particular, to reduced juvenile delinquency.

Too often, the concept of a park is a place with mowed turf grass, ornamental trees and large parking lots. Little attention is given to ensuring that natural system benefits are maintained over time. In an effort to correct this notion, the state DCNR has created a manual entitled *Creating Sustainable Community Parks*.

This guidebook was created to outline the benefits of enhancing the natural resources in local parks, to maintain parks in a sustainable manner, and to provide a step-by step guide to help park staff achieve those results. The guidebook is directed primarily to park staff charged with the

design and maintenance of local parklands. It provides steps for those who wish to enhance the natural resources of one small area of a park, as well as those who want to make their maintenance processes more environmentally sound. However, this guidebook is also applicable to local government officials who have the authority to create new - and enhance existing - parks. This document could also be of assistance to state agencies when deciding which parks would benefit most from award grants. The information in this guidebook can help identify the benefits of shifting some funding from traditional recreation-focused parks to ones that incorporate natural resource conservation and sustainability into their design process and programming.

To enhance the usefulness of this manual, The *Designing With Natives* program is providing a set of tools to help park managers. These include additional information on:

1. Analyzing sites to create better sight designs and plans;  
Create native habitat that is environmentally significant;
  - Biological diversity
  - Layering and vegetation structure
  - The value of site size and connecting parks with larger habitat networks
2. Selecting native plants for the right places;
  - Native plants for tough places
  - Seasonal color
  - Long bloomers and awesome blossoms
3. Create beautiful native gardens for residents to copy;
  - Rain gardens
  - Pollinator gardens
  - Rock gardens
  - Slope gardens
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4. Ways to lower maintenance costs;
  - Reduce and manage lawn
  - Naturalizing areas
  - Plant selection