

# McHenry County Urban Forestry Summary



**CHICAGO  
REGION  
TREES  
INITIATIVE**

Our Trees.  
Our Communities.  
Our Future.

The Chicago Region Trees Initiative's (CRTI) goal is that by 2050 the Chicago region will have a healthier urban forest with a diversity of tree species and ages, appropriately distributed across land use types. To achieve that goal, CRTI works with counties to help them understand their urban forest and identify strategies that they can use to improve the environmental, economic, and social benefits that trees can provide their residents. This document provides information counties need to effectively manage their local forest. For municipal canopy summaries, go to: <https://chicagorti.org/maps/municipal-canopy-summaries/>.

## The Importance of Urban Trees

The urban forest includes all trees in an urban setting regardless of who owns or manages them, such as parkway trees, forested natural areas, and the trees on residential property. Trees improve air and water quality, reduce flooding and the urban heat island effect, and reduce energy use by shading buildings. They also provide habitat for wildlife and improve residents' quality of life by reducing crime rates, increasing property value, and boosting social cohesion in neighborhoods.

Understanding the extent of tree canopy is critical for urban planning. The magnitude of benefits that trees provide correlates with the size, structure, and location of their canopy. Canopy maps can be used to quantify the benefits that their trees provide, identify where new plantings would have the greatest impact, and to develop strategies for expanding the canopy.



Figure 1: Comparison of imagery and land cover map. Seven types of gray and green infrastructure are in the land cover map.

The Chicago Region Trees Initiative, US Department of Agriculture Forest Service, and the University of Vermont mapped land cover across the seven-county Chicago region in a project funded by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, the Rice Foundation, and the US Forest Service. This project not only identifies tree canopy, but also other green infrastructure, including grass and shrubs, bare soil and water, and gray infrastructure including buildings, roads and rails, and other paved surfaces like sidewalks and parking lots (Fig. 1). Hereafter, these seven layers will be referred to as “land cover types.”

# McHenry County Urban Forestry Summary



**CHICAGO  
REGION  
TREES  
INITIATIVE**

Our Trees.  
Our Communities.  
Our Future.

## Land and Canopy Cover in Your County

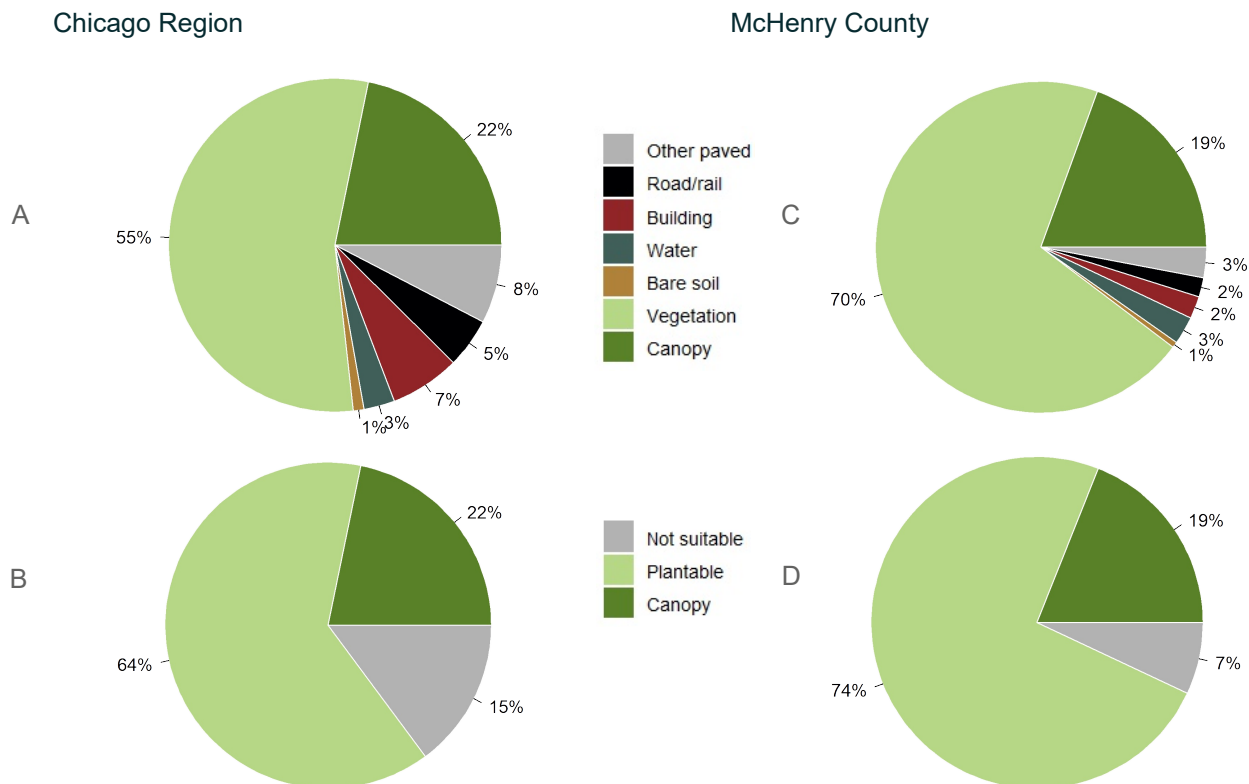


Figure 2: Land cover distribution and plantable space in the Chicago Region (A and B), and in McHenry County (C and D).

Overall, 22% of Chicago Region is covered by tree canopy (Fig. 2). In all, 64% of the county is plantable, meaning that canopy cover could potentially be raised to 85% if these areas were converted to trees. Spaces where trees could potentially be planted (plantable spaces) can be identified by adding together land cover types that could be converted to canopy: vegetation, bare soil, and other paved surfaces like sidewalks and parking lots.

It is important to note that while these surfaces could theoretically be covered with canopy, it is not necessarily preferable. For example, agricultural fields and baseball diamonds are included as “plantable space,” but they may not be considered ideal sites to expand the forest canopy.

Land cover data can also describe canopy at the county scale. McHenry County currently has 19% canopy cover and could potentially increase its canopy to 93% (Fig. 2).

# McHenry County Urban Forestry Summary



**CHICAGO  
REGION  
TREES  
INITIATIVE**

Our Trees.  
Our Communities.  
Our Future.

## Percent Land Cover by Land Use

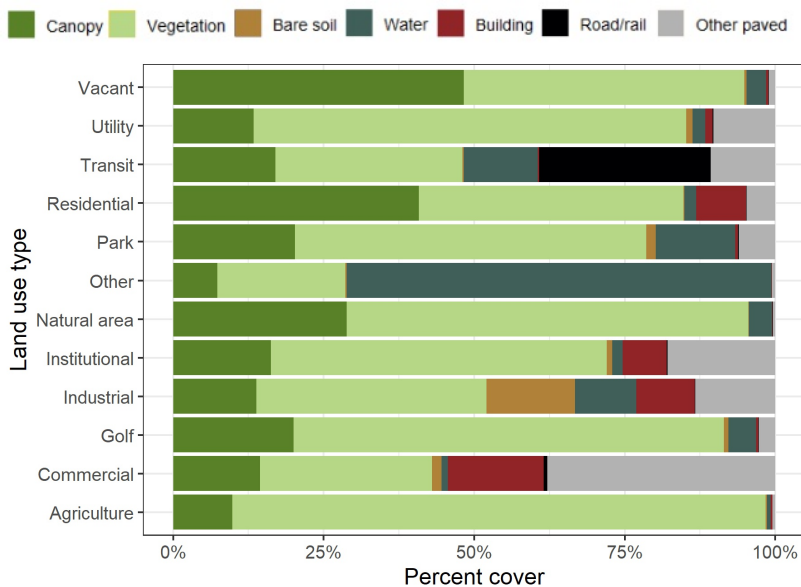


Figure 3: Variations in land cover across land use types.

Canopy cover is not distributed evenly across the region or within counties. To better understand how land cover patterns vary, they are compared across land use types like residential, commercial, or park properties. In McHenry County, the highest percentage of canopy is found in vacant and residential properties (Fig. 3). Other and agricultural properties have the lowest canopy cover. As one might expect, transit areas have the largest proportion of roads, and industrial, residential, and commercial land use types have an abundance of buildings. See Table 1 on page 5 of this report for a detailed analysis of land cover distribution.

## Plantable Space Percentages

By combining turf, bare soil, and other paved surface categories, we can identify which land use types have the most room for growth. In McHenry County, the highest proportions of plantable space are found in utility, golf, and agricultural properties (Fig. 4).

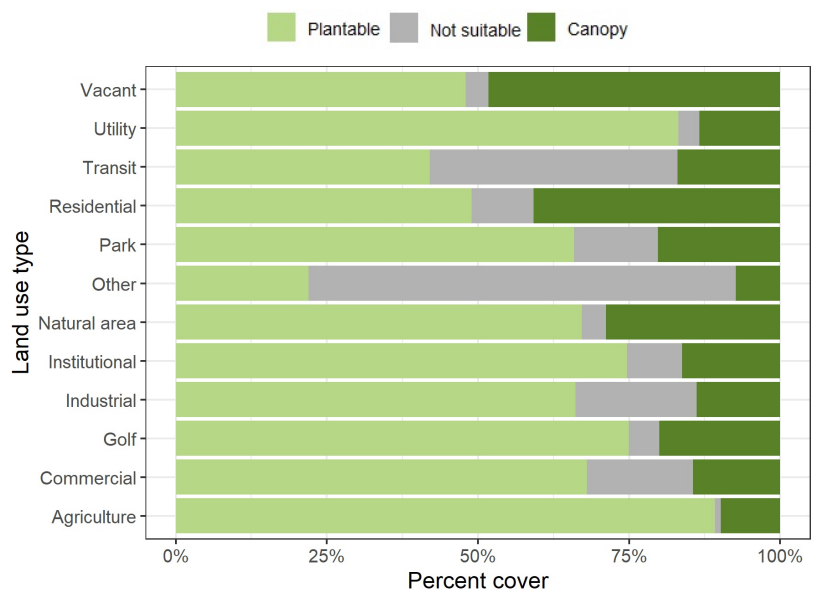


Figure 4: Current canopy and possible planting space across land use types.

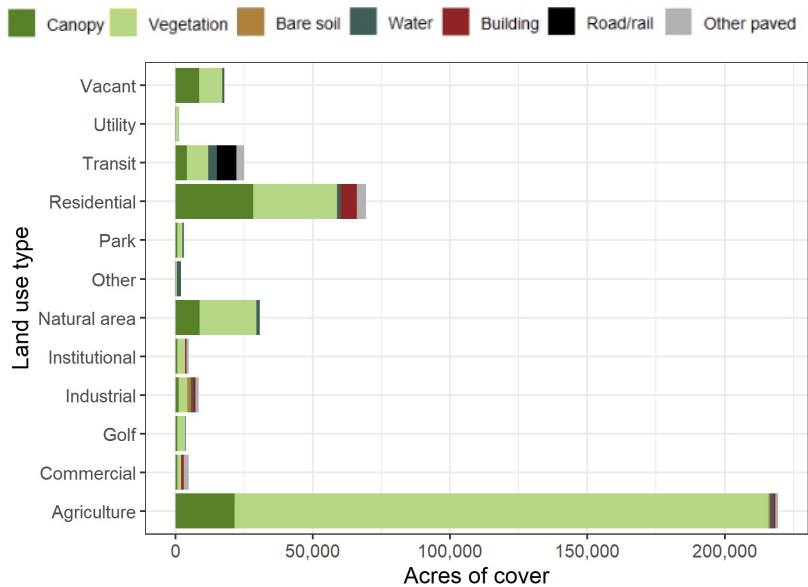
# McHenry County Urban Forestry Summary



**CHICAGO  
REGION  
TREES  
INITIATIVE**

Our Trees.  
Our Communities.  
Our Future.

## Land Cover Area by Land Use



While utility and golf properties have a high proportion of plantable space, these land use types make up a relatively small area in McHenry County (Fig. 5). Most of the land is agricultural followed by residential.

Figure 5: Acres of land cover types across land uses.

## Plantable Space Area

Residential and agriculture land use types could have the greatest impact in expanding the canopy (Fig. 6). However, each of these land use types require different strategies to increase canopy. Residential property owners could be encouraged to plant more through tree giveaways, ordinances that encourage preservation, or stormwater tax breaks for properties that have more canopy. Agricultural properties could host more trees along roads and waterways, and these trees could reduce erosion and fertilizer runoff.

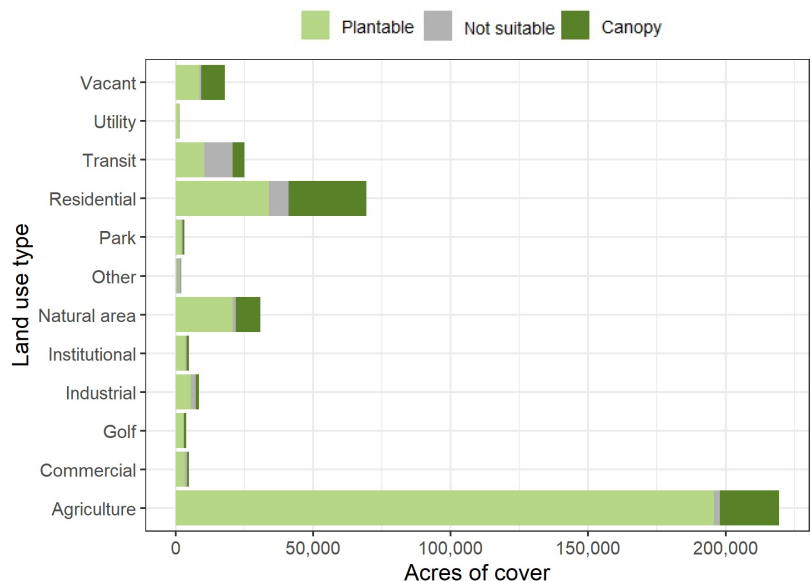


Figure 6: Acres of plantable space, canopy, and not suitable land cover types across land uses.

# McHenry County Urban Forestry Summary



**CHICAGO  
REGION  
TREES  
INITIATIVE**

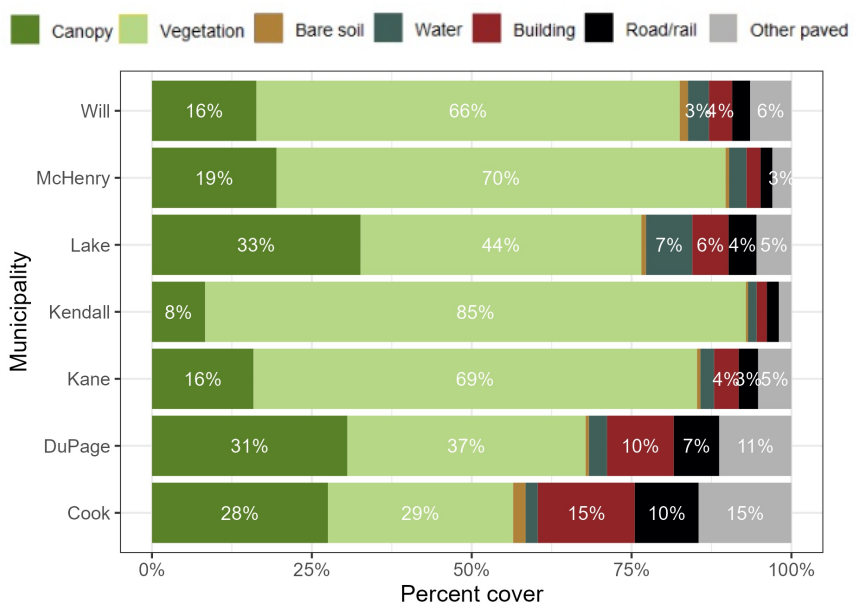
Our Trees.  
Our Communities.  
Our Future.

## Land Cover Across Land Use Types

Table 1: Summary of land cover across land use types.

LANDUSE	CANOPY		VEGETATION		BARE SOIL		WATER		BUILDINGS		ROADS/RAIL		OTHER PAVED	
	ACRES	PERCENT	ACRES	PERCENT	ACRES	PERCENT	ACRES	PERCENT	ACRES	PERCENT	ACRES	PERCENT	ACRES	PERCENT
Agriculture	21,618	9.8%	194,344	88.5%	411	0.2%	1,384	0.6%	673	0.3%	11	0.0%	1,042	0.5%
Commercial	700	14.4%	1,390	28.6%	75	1.5%	51	1.0%	772	15.9%	32	0.7%	1,838	37.8%
Golf	774	20.0%	2,764	71.4%	29	0.8%	180	4.6%	15	0.4%	1	0.0%	107	2.8%
Industrial	1,169	13.8%	3,229	38.2%	1,240	14.7%	866	10.2%	817	9.7%	9	0.1%	1,123	13.3%
Institutional	783	16.2%	2,694	55.8%	46	1.0%	81	1.7%	353	7.3%	7	0.2%	866	17.9%
Natural area	8,902	28.8%	20,580	66.7%	22	0.1%	1,190	3.9%	23	0.1%	14	0.0%	128	0.4%
Other	153	7.3%	442	21.2%	5	0.2%	1,468	70.6%	2	0.1%	0	0.0%	11	0.5%
Park	651	20.3%	1,874	58.3%	50	1.5%	424	13.2%	15	0.5%	5	0.2%	193	6.0%
Residential	28,320	40.8%	30,509	43.9%	150	0.2%	1,341	1.9%	5,739	8.3%	80	0.1%	3,306	4.8%
Transit	4,235	17.0%	7,762	31.1%	49	0.2%	3,080	12.3%	43	0.2%	7,123	28.5%	2,674	10.7%
Utility	190	13.4%	1,018	71.8%	16	1.1%	30	2.1%	17	1.2%	3	0.2%	145	10.3%
Vacant	8,689	48.3%	8,369	46.5%	68	0.4%	590	3.3%	73	0.4%	11	0.1%	190	1.1%

## Land Cover in Regional Counties



McHenry has similar canopy cover and less gray infrastructure than most of the region (Fig. 7).

Figure 7: Comparison of land cover of McHenry and regional counties.

# McHenry County Urban Forestry Summary



**CHICAGO  
REGION  
TREES  
INITIATIVE**

Our Trees.  
Our Communities.  
Our Future.

## Canopy change from 2010 to 2017

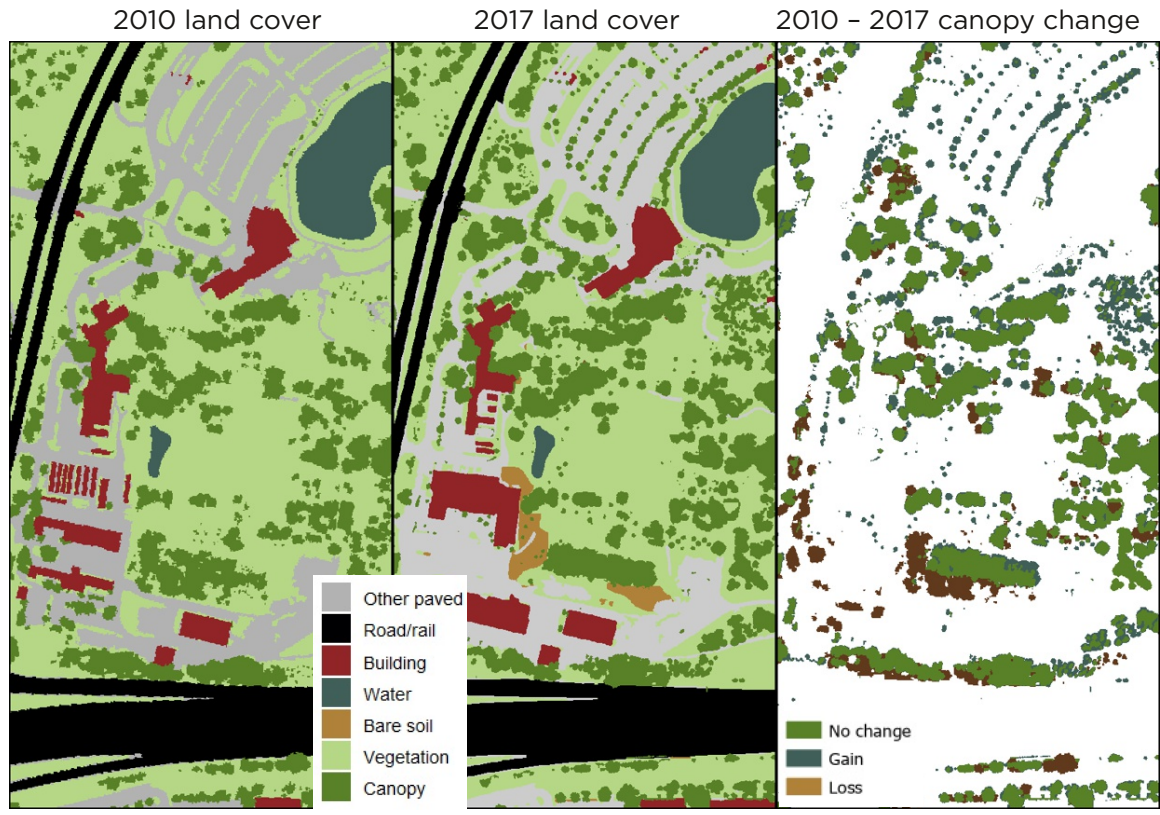


Figure 8: Example of land cover and canopy change at The Morton Arboretum.

The Chicago region has changed a lot from 2010 to 2017, including new development, tree plantings, and growth of existing trees. Examples of this can be seen at The Morton Arboretum (Fig 8).

In McHenry County, canopy has increased from 18% to 19% with gains across all land use types (Fig. 9).

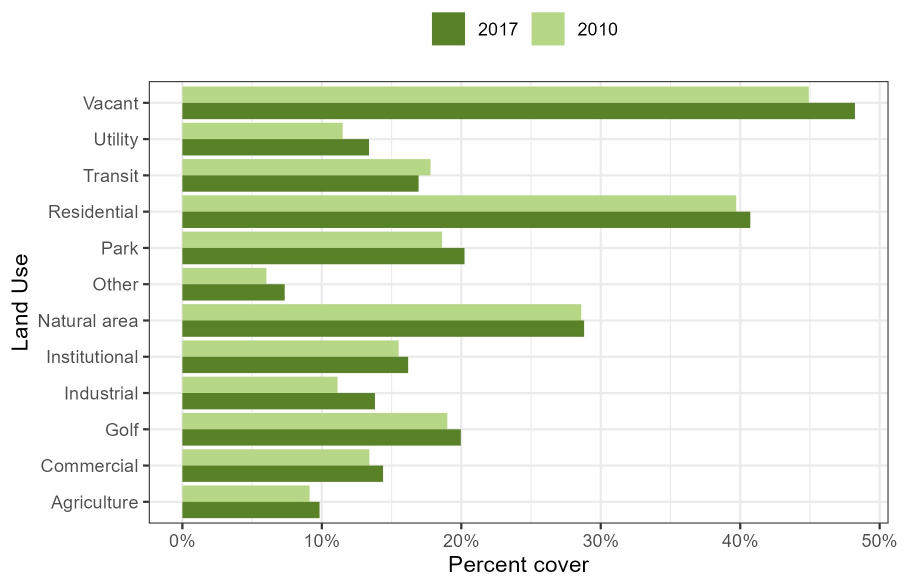


Figure 9: Canopy change across land use types in McHenry County.

# McHenry County Urban Forestry Summary



CHICAGO  
REGION  
TREES  
INITIATIVE

Our Trees.  
Our Communities.  
Our Future.

## Know What You Have

While understanding canopy is an important component of urban forestry, canopy does not show the whole picture. It cannot identify tree species, health, or vulnerability to pests, diseases, or climate change. A tree inventory is needed to better understand and manage the urban forest (Fig. 10).

Types of tree inventories vary. The most complete inventories gather data on every tree in the study area and each tree's species, size, any health issues it may have, and its specific location. This type of inventory provides the most complete data for planning and monitoring the urban forest's health and growth over time. Many communities have conducted such inventories on public property.

Complete inventories are invaluable for urban forest management but are expensive and time consuming to conduct. They may not be practical for very large areas. Sample inventories (that only gather information on a subset of trees) are much easier to conduct but can only be used to estimate species and size diversity, and tree abundance. The Morton Arboretum and the USDA Forest Service conducted a sample inventory of 1,600 plots across the seven-county region and determined species composition at the county scale (Fig. 11).

The figures on pages 8 and 9 of this report were developed using that tree census, which sampled 200 plots across each county and 200 more in the City of Chicago.



Figure 10: Measuring a tree for an inventory.



Figure 11: You can learn more about the tree census here: <https://mortonarb.org/science/tree-census/>

# McHenry County Urban Forestry Summary



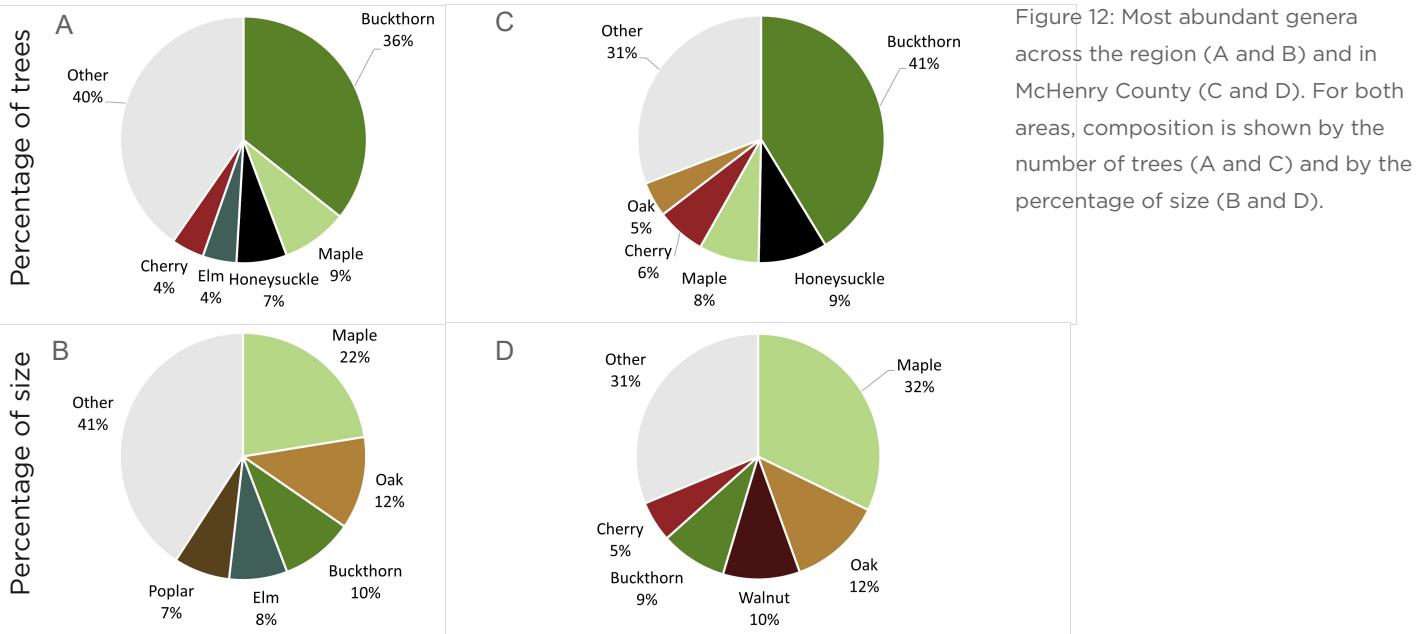
**CHICAGO  
REGION  
TREES  
INITIATIVE**

Our Trees.  
Our Communities.  
Our Future.

## Your County's Species Diversity

Regional forest

McHenry County



This analysis allows us to look at diversity in two ways: by the abundance of individual trees, and the proportion of the entire canopy that these trees make up. Both measures are important. Number of individual stems is useful when calculating the number of trees that might be affected by a given pest or disease. The abundance of canopy will show how the entire forest might change. That is, losing five small apple trees would have a much smaller impact on the ecosystem services that a forest offers than losing five mature oaks. Figure 12 shows the most abundant genera in the region and in Cook County.

The forests of the Chicago Region have some serious issues. Many of the most abundant genera are invasive species, like European buckthorn. The planted forest often relies too heavily on a few genera, like maples, ash, and honeylocust. Emerald ash borer has recently shown that a forest with low diversity can be devastated by a pest. Oaks and

hickories were historically the most abundant trees in the region and wildlife depend on them for food and habitat, but they make up a relatively small proportion of the region's trees now.

This illustrates how critical it is to actively increase species diversity where possible. Most pests and diseases (like emerald ash borer and Dutch elm disease) only attack a specific species or genus of plants. By diversifying species, we can ensure that the regional forest is resilient to these attacks. CRTI recommends that counties strive to have no more than 15% of a single family, 10% of a genus, and 5% of a species in their plantings. These guidelines should be met not only across the whole county, but at smaller scales like individual blocks.

McHenry County, like most of the region, has an unsustainable amount of maples and an abundance of invasive species.



# McHenry County Urban Forestry Summary



CHICAGO  
REGION  
TREES  
INITIATIVE

Our Trees.  
Our Communities.  
Our Future.

## Tree Size Class Distribution

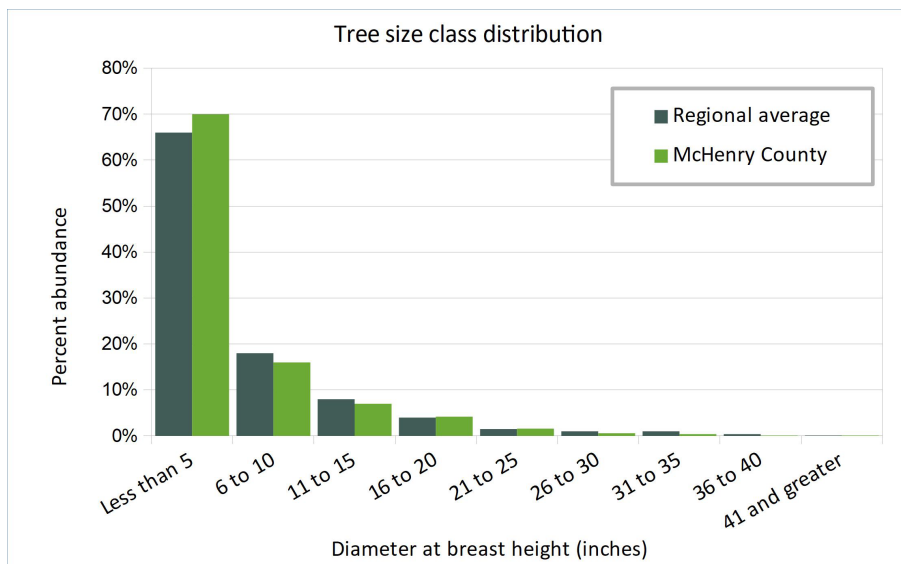


Figure 13: Distribution of tree sizes in McHenry County and across the region.

Age and size diversity are other important types of diversity to consider beyond species. A sustainable forest has a variety of ages and sizes of trees. We want our urban forest to have a range of sizes and ages so that it doesn't grow, age, and eventually die at the same time.

It is important to foster sustainable age diversity. This can be done by planting trees over several years, planting trees with different growth habits (some grow quickly and have shorter lifespans than others), and by under-planting aging trees so that something is ready to replace them when they die.

Across the region, there are a decreasing number of trees in larger size classes (Fig. 13). This is ideal, as there is room for some trees to die between each size class with plenty remaining to grow into the next age and size class. McHenry County has similar size distribution as the rest of the region.

It is also important to look at smaller areas, like individual blocks or properties. Planning for size class diversity on these scales is important to local ecosystem services including reducing energy use, managing stormwater, and retaining soil.

# McHenry County Urban Forestry Summary



CHICAGO  
REGION  
TREES  
INITIATIVE

Our Trees.  
Our Communities.  
Our Future.

## The Unique Benefits of Your County

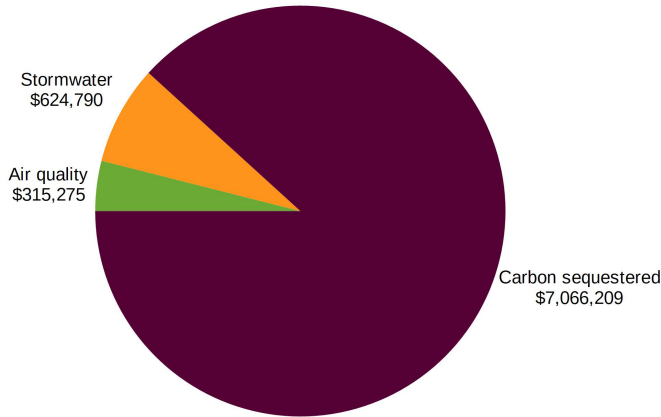


Figure 14: Trees offer myriad benefits, including intercepting stormwater, improving air quality and removing carbon from the atmosphere.

Urban trees are extremely valuable. Research has provided data to help quantify the values that trees provide, far beyond the aesthetics that are readily recognized. For example, urban trees:

1. Save energy by reducing surface temperatures and shading buildings.
2. Store carbon dioxide and remove pollutants from the air.
3. Intercept stormwater and help reduce flooding.
4. Increase property values and make our communities more pleasant.
5. Improve health.

The i-Tree suite of tools was developed by the USDA Forest Service. They allow users to calculate tree benefits at a variety of scales—from an individual tree to entire tree inventories, and even landscape scale assessments of canopy and hydrology. For more information on i-Tree tools and methodology, visit [iTreetools.org](http://iTreetools.org).

Figure 14 shows the benefits that all the trees (including trees public and private property) in McHenry County offer. These values were calculated with i-Tree Landscape using a 2010 land cover layer. Each year, McHenry County's trees provide the municipality with \$8,006,000 worth of benefits. These trees also store a lot of carbon, which is valued at an additional \$340,614,000.



# McHenry County Urban Forestry Summary



CHICAGO  
REGION  
TREES  
INITIATIVE

Our Trees.  
Our Communities.  
Our Future.

## Temperature and Trees

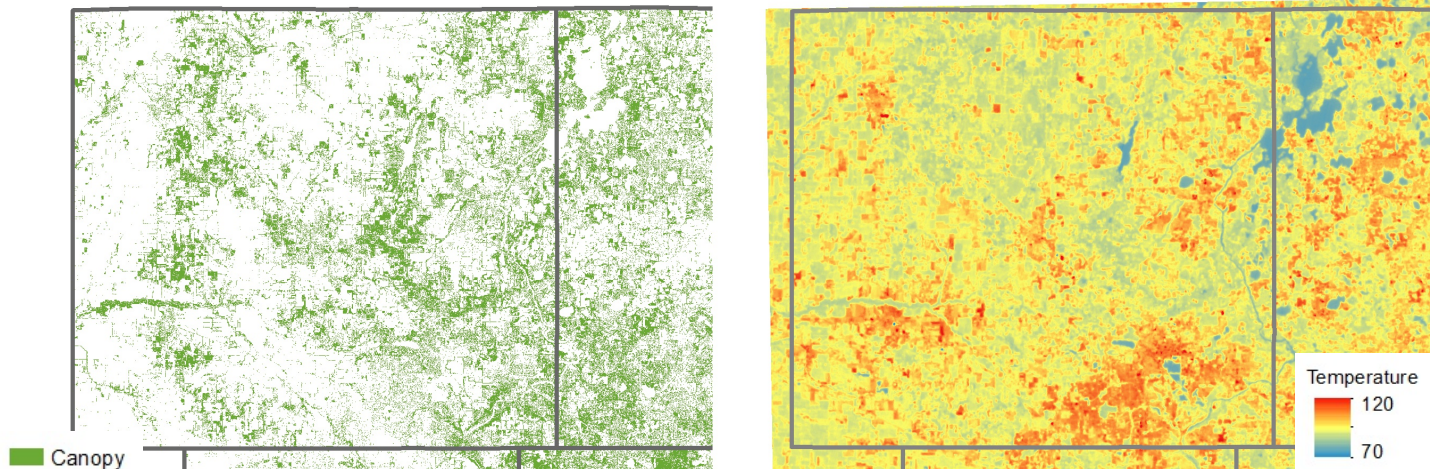


Figure 15: The image on the left shows tree canopy and on the right shows surface temperature. Surface temperature was calculated using a LandSat8 image from July 2017. Areas that have higher tree canopy tend to have lower temperatures.

Cities tend to be hotter than rural areas because buildings and pavement absorb the sun's energy and release it as heat—known as the urban heat island effect. High urban temperatures increase the use of energy within buildings. It can also cause health issues, and extreme heat can even cause death. Trees help lower urban temperatures by

shading built surfaces and through evaporative cooling. Urban areas that have more tree canopy tend to have lower surface temperatures (Figure 15). Planting more trees in parking lots and around buildings can be especially helpful in reducing urban temperatures and making cities more comfortable.



# McHenry County Urban Forestry Summary



**CHICAGO  
REGION  
TREES  
INITIATIVE**

Our Trees.  
Our Communities.  
Our Future.

## Woody Invasive Species

Woody invasive species like European buckthorn and bush honeysuckles make up over one in three trees in the region. These shrubs were introduced as ornamental specimens, but they have escaped cultivation. Birds eat the berries produced by buckthorn and honeysuckle and disperse the seeds into natural areas. Both genera are extremely disruptive to native plants and animals. They create dense thickets and prevent other species from growing around them (Fig. 16). In natural areas, they are one of the leading contributors to reduced oak regeneration.

It is imperative to remove buckthorn from all land uses, as the seeds can easily travel to natural areas. It is difficult to dictate plantings on private property but educating residents can encourage them to remove it of their own accord. This could include signage explaining invasive removal on public property, or expansion of programs like Conservation@Home.

Woody invasives are becoming more problematic region-wide according to 2010 and 2020 inventories (Fig. 17). For more information on how to manage woody invasive species, see: <https://chicagorti.org/program/stop-invasives/>.



Figure 16: A buckthorn thicket. Notice the lack of understory vegetation and dense shade. Photo credit: Brett Jelinek.

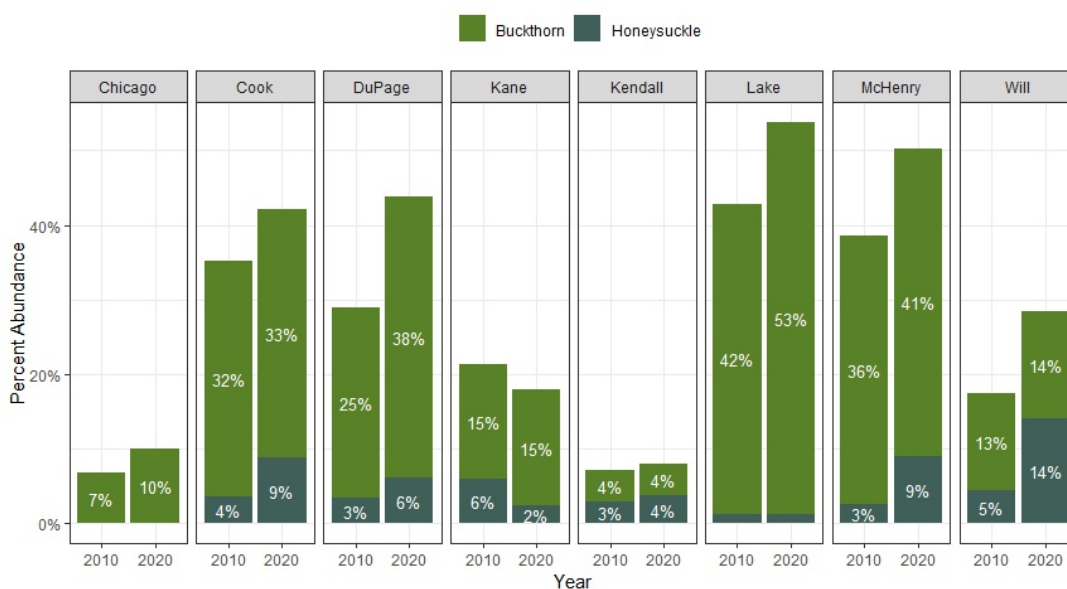


Figure 17: Woody invasive abundance across all counties in 2010 and 2020.

# McHenry County Urban Forestry Summary



**CHICAGO  
REGION  
TREES  
INITIATIVE**

Our Trees.  
Our Communities.  
Our Future.

Oaks are a keystone species in our region's ecology. They provide habitat and food for countless animals, and they influence which plants grow around them. Oaks shape our regions ecosystems, and are in part responsible for the Chicago region being home to more species than the state of Wisconsin, and has nearly three times as many species as the entire country of the Netherlands.

Prior to Euro-American settlement, oaks were the most abundant tree species in the region. However, conversion of natural areas to agriculture and development has removed many of the oaks from our region. Only 17% of oak ecosystems remain region-wide. In McHenry County, 10% of the original oak ecosystems still stand. For more information on oak ecosystems in the Chicago region, see Chicago Wilderness's Oak Ecosystem Recovery Plan.

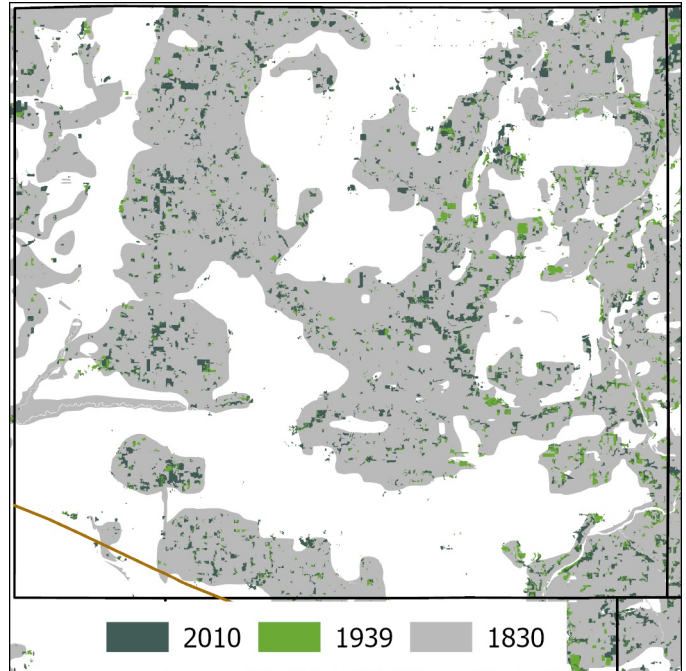
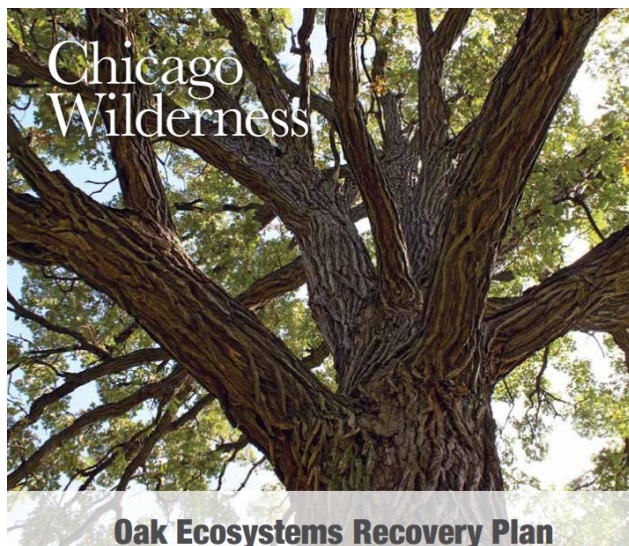


Figure 18: The extent of oak ecosystems prior to Euro-American colonization (1830), in 1939, and in 2010.



**SUSTAINING OAKS  
IN THE CHICAGO WILDERNESS REGION**

Funded by USDA Forest Service and US Fish & Wildlife Service  
Lead collaborators: Lake County Forest Preserve District • The Morton Arboretum

Figure 19: The Oak Ecosystem Recovery Plan outlines the history of oaks in the Chicago Region and strategies to ensure their future.

Oaks currently make up 12% of McHenry County's canopy, but they accounted for 60% prior to Euro-American settlement. The majority of oaks in McHenry County are large and old. These trees are likely reaching the end of their life span, and as they die, there are no young trees to replace them. This could further imperil oak ecosystems.

Restoring oak ecosystems is a major focus of CRTI. One of the largest future threats to oaks is that very few of existing oak ecosystems are protected; in McHenry County 84% of remnant oak ecosystems are privately held. CRTI is striving to identify strategies to protect these remnant woodlands, and is reaching out to private land owners to improve how the ecosystems are managed. To learn more, visit: <https://chicagorti.org/program/oak-ecosystems-recovery-project/>

# McHenry County

## Urban Forestry Summary



CHICAGO  
REGION  
TREES  
INITIATIVE

Our Trees.  
Our Communities.  
Our Future.

### Important Considerations for Management of the Urban Forest

A healthy urban forest can provide a wide range of benefits that have significant impacts on quality of life. Understanding what you have is an important first step. Next is to manage the urban forest effectively. There are several key ingredients in a well-managed urban forest and these are resources and organizations that can help you achieve that goal.

**Preservation and Protection Ordinances:** Ordinances are policy and guiding documents for the care, protection and preservation of the urban forest. The Chicago Region Trees Initiative has staff who will work with you to help you at no cost and templates to get you started.

**Tree Inventory:** A tree inventory is a mechanism to inform what trees you have, where they are located, how many there are, and their condition. This is a critical tool in managing the urban forest—especially in improving species diversity and reducing the risk of catastrophic loss. Visit the CRTI website to learn about funding opportunities <https://chicagorti.org/programs>.

**Urban Forest Management Plan:** An urban forest management plan is a strategy document that guides Landowners and managers in allocating manpower and funding to manage the urban forest. It is important to develop a plan that outlines where your urban forest is now and a framework to improve level of care, species selection, proper practices, and qualifications, as skills and resources are developed. A template has been developed to help you get started and to identify areas where you can begin to improve practices. <https://chicagorti.org/program/tree-ordinance-templates>.

**ISA Certified Arborist:** You would greatly benefit from having an International Society of Arboriculture certified arborist on staff. It is not a hard process and could improve the professionalism of your team. The Illinois Arborists Association has several training opportunities to train your staff and build skills and knowledge in urban forestry. Note: If you are not ready for staff to assume this role, be sure to use certified arborists to conduct the urban forestry work. A list is available on the IAA website.

**Resident Engagement:** 70% of our trees are located on private property. You can connect your residents to information and resources that will help them improve the health of the urban forest on their properties. The CRTI website has several resources for individual citizens.

---

#### Important links:

Chicago Region Trees Initiative: [chicagoRTI.org](http://chicagoRTI.org)

Illinois Arborist Association: [illinoisarborist.org](http://illinoisarborist.org)

Illinois DNR Urban Forestry: [www2.illinois.gov/dnr/conservation/Forestry/UrbanForestry](http://www2.illinois.gov/dnr/conservation/Forestry/UrbanForestry)

Openlands TreeKeepers: [openlands.org/what-we-do/trees/treekeepers](http://openlands.org/what-we-do/trees/treekeepers)