



Guide to

ENHANCING YOUR URBAN TREE CANOPY

Lessons Learned from **Trees for Kaimukī**
for your community



Can Honolulu, the capital and most populous city in Hawai'i, become a city in the trees?

Can your city or neighborhood become one as well?

The answer is yes, but only if individual communities and neighborhoods are actively involved in—and feel a deep sense of connection and ownership over—the planning, planting, and care of their trees.

Kaimukī's Tree Canopy, 2020
Courtesy of Hawai'i Division of Forestry and Wildlife and U.S. Forest Service



Located on the southeast coast of O'ahu, the third largest of the Hawaiian Islands, Honolulu is losing its tree canopy at an alarming rate. In fact, it has recently lost more than 76,000 trees—nearly 5% of its total urban tree canopy—in just four years.

Honolulu is not alone. Urban forests are declining in many cities across the United States. Research conducted by the U.S. Forest Service and others indicate that tree cover in urban areas is on the decline, with a national average of just 27 percent.

Currently, Honolulu's tree canopy averages only 20 percent, with some urban neighborhoods, like Kaimukī, having even less, according to the Honolulu Urban Tree Canopy Assessment and the Hawai'i Tree Canopy Viewer. When Kaimukī residents learned of this, they decided to take action.



Kaimukī Neighborhood

Located east of Mānoa and inland from Lē‘ahi (Diamond Head), Kaimukī is one of Honolulu’s oldest urban neighborhoods. It features a defined business district along one major roadway with an eclectic mix of established small businesses, trendy shops, and restaurants. The neighborhood is surrounded by a quiet residential district that boasts a blend of historic and modern homes. According to U.S. Census data, Kaimukī is an ethnically diverse neighborhood with an older population. However, despite its convenient location to downtown Honolulu, which makes it a desirable neighborhood to live in, it is not as well-off economically as the rest of the metropolitan area.



Trees for Kaimukī

Envision Kaimukī, an all-volunteer, community group dedicated to enhancing and preserving the livability and beauty of the Kaimukī neighborhood in Honolulu. In collaboration with other nonprofit organizations, the group created Trees for Kaimukī - a community-based initiative focused on increasing the area’s urban tree canopy and ultimately mitigating the effects from the changing climate.

Trees for Kaimukī is a partnership between Envision Kaimukī, Trees for Honolulu’s Future, Smart Trees Pacific, and the National Park Service. Together, the groups are planting as many of the right trees in the right places, with the right care as possible to improve

the neighborhood’s pedestrian experience, beautify the business corridor, and reduce the impact of excessive heat due to climate change.

One of Trees for Kaimukī’s founding goals is to provide a community-based model that other communities can replicate. The organization believes that the successful effort of one community can serve as a guide for others and would therefore like to share the lessons learned and insights gained from their efforts through this guide. This guide offers an inside look at how Trees for Kaimukī has achieved their successes to date as well as some valuable lessons they’ve acquired along the way.

Lessons Learned

Over the last five years, Trees for Kaimukī has made significant progress toward the goal of increasing the community’s urban tree canopy. Along the way, the organization has encountered—and overcome—challenges both great and small, from a pandemic to volunteer fatigue. There isn’t a magic formula or a one-size-fits-all approach that will work for every community, every time. Nor are any of the steps in the process a one-and-done task.

Trees for Kaimukī learned—and relearned—the key lessons in this guide with each success and setback they had. Ultimately, Trees for Kaimukī hopes these lessons will make your community’s journey a little easier.

Although the lessons are presented in a sequential order, they are interconnected. They highlight an ongoing cycle of interactions and feedback that builds upon itself to create a deeper and more meaningful connection with the community.



LESSON 1

Find Your Champions



For your urban tree canopy project to be successful, it needs dedicated champions who have the passion and energy needed to bring people with different needs, opportunities, perspectives, and preferences together to work towards a common vision. Your initial outreach and engagement should focus on establishing connections and building trust. This step sets the foundation for the entire process by creating opportunities for interactions.

Take advantage of every opportunity to network. Begin with a core group of dedicated individuals and expand from there. Trees for Kaimukī began by seeking out like-minded individuals and groups at community events and through one-on-one conversations.

Engage with residents through community meetings, workshops, or surveys to understand community needs, preferences, and concerns. Collaborate with community organizations, municipal authorities, and other relevant stakeholders. Look at other organizations, community groups, and initiatives that are occurring, or have occurred in the past, and focus on those with similar visions and goals. Seek their input, support, and participation in the project. You can learn from what has worked well—and what has not—from other organizations, as well as your own efforts to build momentum.



Trees for Kaimukī Champion

For Trees for Kaimukī, our trailblazer and major champion was the late Sharon Schneider, who passed away in June 2022. Her spirit, impact, and legacy live on through this initiative.

Sharon’s leadership and deep roots in the community made her the perfect person to put us on a path to success. As the leader of EnVision Kaimukī and chair of the Kaimukī Neighborhood Board, she was a community activist who saw opportunities and implemented ideas. Her superpower was having a vision and bringing people together.

After attending the Trees for Honolulu’s Future’s “Growing Our Urban Forest” Conference in 2018, Sharon immediately saw how EnVision Kaimukī could contribute to its vision of creating a more livable neighborhood. Following the conference, she wasted no time in spearheading the creation of Trees for Kaimukī which was born through a coalition of organizations.





LESSON 2

Start with a Clear Vision



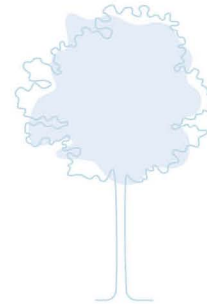
Developing the right guiding vision and goals for your urban tree canopy projects means setting aside preconceived ideas about what you may think the community needs and instead actively listening to what its members and stakeholders believe are the real issues, opportunities, and solutions. It is critical to ask focused questions and listen intently to identify shared values and attain broad agreement on what the community wants to accomplish and how. Your vision and goals become the rallying cry that your champions and other stakeholders need to build grassroots support. By articulating them in a clear and concise manner, you help your organization focus on what is most important and provide a framework for developing a strategic plan.

Trees for Kaimukī built its vision from the ground up by hosting a large community event to celebrate trees in which community members were invited to be a part of discussions related to opportunities and challenges and were encouraged to participate in planning and implementation. The initial framework evolved based on community feedback. This process required flexibility and resilience by all who were involved in the initial effort.

Trees for Kaimukī Vision, Mission, and Values

VISION

A tree-filled Kaimukī that enhances the lives of Kaimukī residents and supports local businesses.



MISSION

Educate our neighbors about the many benefits of trees.

Facilitate and coordinate the planning, planting, and maintenance of trees for a sustainable urban forest.

Incorporate this effort to improve the streetscape of Wai'ālae Avenue for pedestrian safety and businesses.

For Kaimukī to be an example for other neighborhoods that want to increase their tree canopy and build community engagement for their project.

VALUES

We believe...

In the urgent need to increase Kaimukī's tree canopy.

In the importance of the right tree at the right place with the right care.

In ourselves to be a part of the bridge between policymakers and those with tree expertise.

In the value of community participation in the planting and maintenance of trees.

In fostering collaboration among all stakeholders to realize the many benefits of trees.

Many volunteers came forward during our initial outreach and engagement period, including those with relevant professional experience to the work we needed to do. One such critical resource was a Kaimukī resident who is a graphic designer. She created, pro bono, a logo, and other branded materials, including banners, t-shirts, and stickers that quickly became coveted items. These gave our communication efforts a consistent look and feel that made people feel a part of something larger. Architects and engineers also shared their expertise in different aspects of the project. If you need something, don't hesitate to ask! Many professionals are willing to get involved.





LESSON 3

Communicate the Why



Before people can be inspired to act, especially over the long term, they first must care. Effectively communicating your vision and goals, as well as conveying a sense of urgency about your mission, are vital in galvanizing your community towards a larger, shared goal.

Trees for Kaimukī communicated its vision and goals with passion and enthusiasm, focusing on the benefits and positive outcomes of an urban tree canopy in addition to highlighting how it addresses the specific needs, challenges, or aspirations of residents to make it more relevant to them.

Our story is a compelling one: Honolulu is losing trees in areas that need them the most—in urban neighborhoods. About 98% of the losses were less than a quarter acre each and spread throughout urban areas. Although approximately 230 acres of new plantings have been introduced, this falls short of what is needed to keep pace with the losses, especially considering the time required to grow a tree canopy.

In March 2018, the City and County of Honolulu passed a resolution to increase the city’s urban tree canopy to at least 35% by 2035. Getting there will require widespread tree plantings on both public and private properties. In 2019, the city finalized its Urban Tree Plan, which calls on residents to volunteer in efforts focused on improving the tree canopy in their neighborhoods.

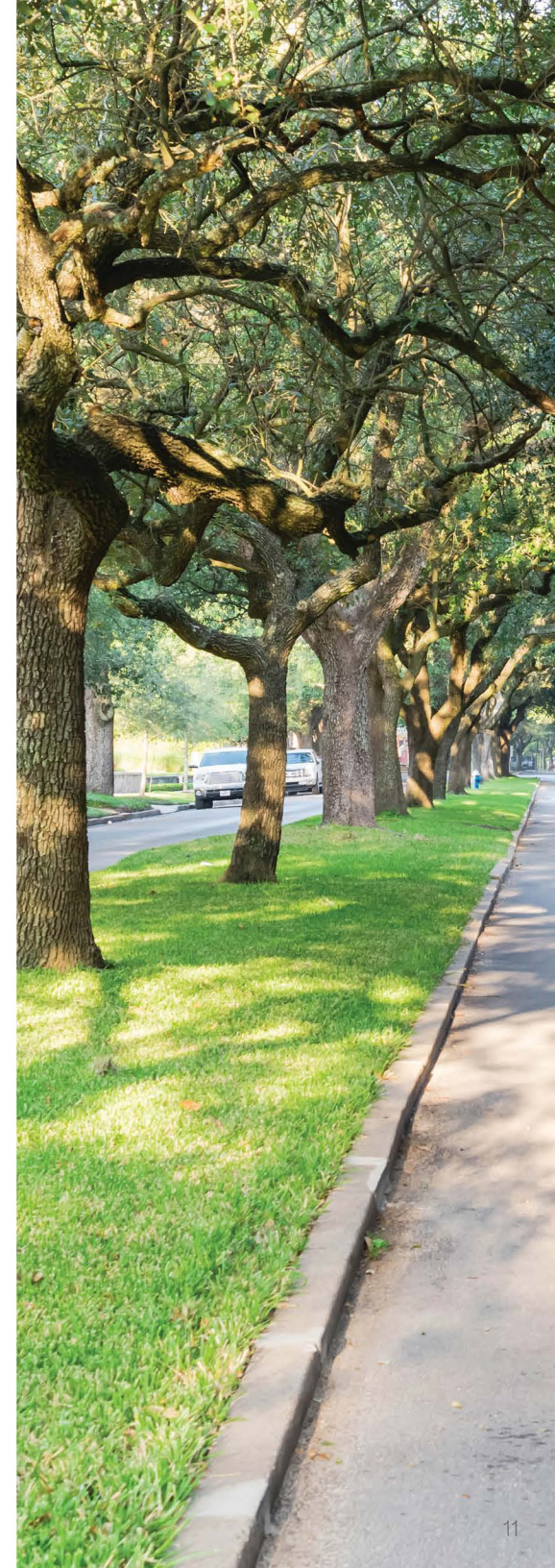
A tree and its canopy provide many environmental, social, and economic benefits that we rely on every day, making it an important aspect of urban planning and development. A healthy tree canopy coupled with robust green infrastructure designs help create sustainable communities that enhance the quality of life of its residents. Additionally, trees can increase property values and attract businesses.

What Is an Urban Tree Canopy? Why Is It Important?

An urban tree canopy is the layer of trees and other vegetation that covers a city or town. On average, the bigger the tree canopy, the greater the benefits. A healthy urban tree canopy can:

- Mitigate the effects of climate change by sequestering carbon and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.
- Enhance water quality by filtering and removing harmful chemicals from stormwater runoff.
- Decrease the urban heat island effect by cooling the air by up to 10 to 20 degrees Celsius on hot days.
- Reduce energy costs by providing shade and insulation.
- Improve air quality by removing carbon dioxide and other pollutants.
- Offer shade and protection from harmful UV rays.
- Minimize stormwater runoff and flooding.
- Provide opportunities for outdoor recreation and relaxation.

Improving the urban tree canopy can also help communities address environmental justice issues. Studies have shown that access to green spaces can improve mental health and wellbeing. Low-income communities often have fewer trees and green spaces than more affluent areas. Embracing a greener urban landscape is a shared endeavor that enriches the community as a whole.





LESSON 4

Involve the Community Early and Often



Community participation is key to the success of any urban tree canopy program. Encourage community members to take ownership and participate in the ongoing care and stewardship of their tree canopy. Plan educational programs, workshops, and events to raise awareness and engage the local community in the project but remain flexible so you can respond to new opportunities and transform obstacles into creative strategies. Identify potential funding sources to support your efforts, including grants, corporate sponsorships, community fundraising, and partnerships with local businesses or organizations. Make sure to also explore opportunities for in-kind contributions such as tree donations or equipment rentals.



Trees for Kaimukī Events

Secrets of Kaimukī Parks and Love Our Kaimukī Parks

Trees for Kaimukī adapted its community engagement strategies to virtual platforms which resulted in two key projects: Secrets of Kaimukī Parks, a webinar held in the midst of the pandemic which allowed us to reach out to the community, and Love Our Kaimukī Parks, an innovative app-based scavenger hunt with prizes from local businesses. Together, these programs encouraged people to explore their local green spaces, provide feedback on park needs, learn about the benefits of trees, and support local businesses.

Parades, Parklets, and Tree Wells

During the pandemic, Trees for Kaimukī partnered with Better Block Hawai'i to help create parklets -small green spaces with seating along sidewalks or in former roadside parking spaces to help businesses with outdoor seating. Being able to provide attractive outdoor seating was critical during the pandemic, and these spaces are now so well loved that they continue to be used today. The trees even featured tags that invited people to email a tree and get a response.

This project happened in part because Trees for Kaimukī participated in the annual Holiday Parade, a popular annual event sponsored by the Kaimukī Business and Professional Association. This fostered relationships with local businesses, raised awareness about our projects, and encouraged those on Wai'alae Avenue to adopt and regularly care for a tree or tree well near their business.

Trees for Kaimukī planned and began implementing a robust community engagement process right before the pandemic started. Just as in-person meetings were about to begin, lockdowns were imposed. Instead of in-person meetings, alternative ways to engage with each other and the community had to be found. Here are the strategies that worked for Trees for Kaimukī.

Arbor Day Plant Adoption

In 2021, Trees for Kaimukī sponsored a tree adoption event at the largest farmer's market on the island of Hawai'i during Arbor Day which drew more than 400 people. Each tree was accompanied by an adoption certificate and a QR code linking to information about its specific planting and care needs. While the benefits of urban trees are widely studied, the effectiveness of tree giveaway programs are not. Although the general idea of providing a tree at little, or no, cost to the recipient, accompanied by information about its care, is common to most tree giveaway programs, the specific tactical steps are highly varied. Additionally, formalized evaluation and keeping in contact with recipients is not usually a priority or incorporated.

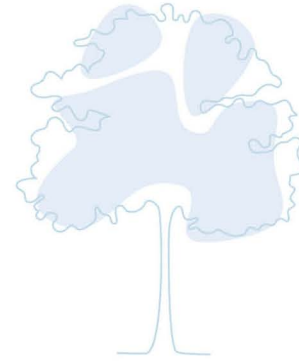
To maximize success, the Trees for Kaimukī partners positioned the event as a "tree adoption" to underscore the serious responsibility of caring for a living thing. Each recipient received (and signed) a "Certificate of Adoption" to commit to performing three tasks - planting the tree properly, registering it with the city, and tracking and reporting its health. A web page was created especially for this purpose and the partners went on to study the results.

LESSON 5

Crowdsource Baseline Data and Expertise



Before you can set realistic goals for increasing your tree canopy, you need to gather baseline data about existing conditions. Conduct a tree inventory to assess the existing tree population and identify areas with the greatest potential for improving the canopy or enhancing green space. This includes identifying tree species and measuring tree height, diameter, and canopy spread which will become the foundation of your long-term maintenance plans. It is also an opportunity to educate the community about their local urban forest and to test the level of volunteer interest in your area.



Citizen Foresters

Trees for Kaimukī launched a citizen science program to train volunteers in tree inventory and community outreach. This initiative not only gathered necessary baseline data, but it also helped spread the word—and the why—of the project, building understanding, awareness, and support.

Smart Trees Pacific led an effort to execute a Citizen Forester program with support from the State of Hawai'i as well as the City and County of Honolulu. This program recruited people to be trained and certified volunteers through word-of-mouth, social media platforms, and engagement with churches, schools, and community groups.

Wearing official t-shirts that identified them as Citizen Foresters, volunteers worked in teams to inventory all the trees in the public realm. They identified 1,300 existing trees and 260 planting sites in public spaces that meet city standards for distances from driveways, intersections, and signage.

Volunteers were often approached by curious community members and were able to increase awareness of the importance of the urban canopy and encourage people to support these efforts.

LESSON 6

Plan, Implement, and Improve



Once the tree canopy inventory is complete, you have the data needed to develop a plan that details the goals, strategies, activities, and timeline for implementing your projects. The plan should be based on goals that are SMART—Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Bound—so it clearly communicates what you want to achieve and how to make it happen.

Identifying individuals to champion specific goals and lead individual projects is key to ensuring the successful implementation of your plan. Trees for Kaimukī had a leader and support from the team for each project. For example, one person focused on working with local businesses to gather support for community efforts related to trees, another was the main contact with the city to understand local regulations and get necessary approvals or permits, and others headed up different projects. Some led a specific phase of a project, while others took responsibility for both its implementation and the long-term maintenance.

Trees for Kaimukī Projects

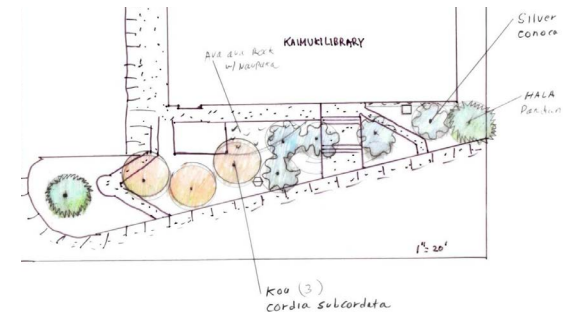
State and Local Parks

Trees for Kaimukī collaborated with different organizations and stakeholders to improve green spaces at Diamond Head State Monument as well as two neighborhood parks, Pu'u o Kaimuki Neighborhood Park and Mau'umae Nature Park. Trees for Kaimukī also encouraged the city to plant trees along the perimeter of Kapāolono Community Park, which they did.

Projects at Diamond Head State Monument included caring for plants at the Lē'ahi Millennium Peace Garden and along the Fort Ruger Pathway. In partnership with the Division of State Parks, volunteers met monthly to apply mulch, remove encroaching plants and tree limbs, and water plants when needed.

Kaimukī Library

Trees for Kaimukī partnered with the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa's College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources to have students bring shade and joy to the entrance of the Kaimukī Library, which had lost its trees to disease about a decade prior. Students interviewed the library manager and developed landscaping plans under the guidance of Andrew Kaufman, an Associate Professor and Landscape Specialist. Students planted a mixture of native and non-native plants suitable for the specific environment. As a result of this partnership, 10 trees now proudly stand in place of a once-lone mock orange bush.



LESSON 7

Ask, Listen, and Learn



The success of your tree canopy projects depend on getting – and keeping – the community engaged. Be open to feedback from stakeholders and community members. Their feedback will not only help you evaluate the effectiveness of your efforts, but also facilitates continuous adaptation and improvement. Additionally, it demonstrates your responsiveness to the community’s evolving preferences and needs, deepening connections and fostering a sense of collaboration and shared ownership.

Actively listening to the community and keeping local officials, organizations, residents, and businesses engaged throughout the process will help address concerns, overcome any initial reluctance to change, nurture new champions, and keep your momentum going. Be flexible and open to revising plans as opportunities present themselves.



Kaimukī Rain Garden

While the Kaimukī Rain Garden wasn’t originally part of the project, the opportunity to transform a strip of grass into a valuable part of the community was too good to pass up. This type of green infrastructure captures stormwater runoff, filters out pollutants, and allows the water to seep into the ground instead of flowing onto streets and into the ocean. Trees for Kaimukī was also able to plant five trees in the area. The community held a blessing ceremony that was well attended by city and state officials, politicians, and residents making it an opportunity to celebrate and advocate for more sustainability projects like the rain garden.

LESSON 8

Monitor, Adapt, and Celebrate



Regular monitoring of your urban tree canopy projects can help you assess its progress and adjust as needed. Develop a monitoring and evaluation framework to track the growth and health of trees as well as gather community feedback. Evaluate the project's outcomes and adapt as needed to improve its effectiveness. To accomplish that, you may need to recruit additional stewards to support maintenance and monitoring programs which require regular check-ins.

Don't forget to celebrate milestones and successes along the way. It's important to share your successes with politicians and government officials to strengthen relationships and reinforce your vision. Taking the time to express gratitude to community volunteers and partners not only fosters stronger connections and reminds every one of the purpose for the projects, but also builds momentum and renews the sense of responsibility that underpins shared goals.

As urban tree canopy projects demand continuous commitment, collaboration, and community involvement, nurturing meaningful relationships with relevant stakeholders remains essential. By maintaining partnerships and promoting community ownership, we ensure the growth and resilience of our urban canopy, fostering a vibrant and interconnected community.



Acknowledgments

Trees for Kaimukī would like to thank its partners, collaborators, and funders for their assistance with this guide and the projects it highlights. We would also like to thank the many Citizen Foresters and volunteers who generously shared their time, expertise, and aloha labor, along with the hundreds of individual donors. **Thank you!**

Partners



Trees for Honolulu's Future is a nonprofit group that coordinates and reinforces efforts of government agencies, private businesses, and nonprofit organizations, to work towards a tree-filled island that preserves and enhances the quality of life of residents in the face of climate change. The organization's mission is facilitating the planting and caring for new trees and the protecting of existing trees in communities across O'ahu and specifically connecting communities with expert assistance and funding. Trees for Honolulu's Future educates the public and government officials about the benefit of the right tree, in the right place, getting the right care and advocates for laws, policies, projects, and funding that supports its mission.



The City and County of Honolulu Division of Urban Forestry (DUF), part of the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR), is responsible for the maintenance of over 250,000 street and park trees. The purpose of the Community Forestry Program is to provide resources, implement educational programming, cultivate private and public partnerships, and foster resilient relationships between communities and the trees across the island of O'ahu.



Smart Trees Pacific is a nonprofit urban forestry organization serving Hawai'i and the Pacific Region. The organization is dedicated to raising awareness about the many benefits of trees by building partnerships and providing operational, technical, and material resources to best use urban trees as a dynamic resource that will enhance sustainable communities in Hawai'i and the Pacific Region. The organization's mission is to promote and provide resources to select, install, establish, and care for trees to provide solutions for the natural and human environment.



The National Park Service - Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program (NPS-RTCA) supports locally-led conservation and outdoor recreation projects across the United States. NPS-RTCA assists communities and public land managers in developing or restoring parks, conservation areas, rivers, and wildlife habitats, as well as creating outdoor recreation opportunities and programs that engage future generations in the outdoors. NPS-RTCA staff work collaboratively with partners to help communities engage stakeholders, build consensus, and prioritize tasks.

Collaborators

City and County of Honolulu

City Council Chair Tommy Waters

City Councilmember Calvin Say

Better Block Hawai'i

da Shop: books + curiosities

Epiphany Episcopal Church

Hapa Landscaping

Hawai'i Farm Bureau

Kaimukī Business and Professional Association

Kaimukī Public Library

Palolo Farms LLC

Paul Mitchell The School Honolulu

State Parks Division, Department of Land and Natural Resources, State of Hawai'i

University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

Funders

Atherton Family Foundation

First Insurance Foundation

Hawai'i Community Foundation

Hawai'i Life Charitable Fund

Kaulunani, Urban and Community Forestry Program, Division of Forestry and Wildlife, Department of Land and Natural Resources, State of Hawai'i

National Fish and Wildlife Foundation

The Laura Jane Musser Fund

The National Environmental Education Foundation

Along with countless individuals who offered monetary contributions and volunteered hundreds of hours of their time to fuel this community effort.

MAHALO!

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Selective Media Coverage

[University of Hawaii article on Kaimukī Library Tree Planting](#)

[Kaimukī Rain Garden Blessing Video Recap](#)

[Local television segment Hawaii News Now on a Kaimukī parklet](#)

[Highlighting local volunteers caring for the tree wells](#)

[Tree adoption event coverage on live local television](#)

[Local news segment by KHON-2 about the kickoff of Trees for Kaimukī](#)

Scan QR Code for
References and
Media Coverage:



or visit: go.nps.gov/kaimuki



Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



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