

COLORADO

Colorado State Forest Service

The Institute for Environmental Services (IES), a Denver based nonprofit founded in 2004, has been working with the Colorado State Forest Service (CSFS), Colorado Tree Coalition (CTC), and the city of Wheat Ridge Parks and Recreation Department since 2013. Utilizing the CTC grant program with funding help from the USDA Forest Service, IES and its partners have planted and maintained hundreds of trees and shrubs and invested over 2,000 volunteer hours in the Wheat Ridge Greenbelt (Greenbelt) open space. The success of this multi-year effort is grounded in the science and educational vision of IES urban forestry projects. Working with Kullerstrand Elementary School, students in grades K-6 with learning challenges attend classroom workshops and planting days each spring. Students learn about the benefits of trees, how to properly plant trees, and how to work safely with hand tools. They tackle nature journals, plant life cycle, mapping, and other ecology topics. During the planting days, the students take charge in planting native trees and shrubs to restore the Greenbelt ecology. They learn about the ecology of the Greenbelt and the health and environmental benefits provided by trees.

By planting native trees, shrubs, and perennial plants, IES projects address environmental improvements in the Wheat Ridge Greenbelt, an important urban greenway used daily for transportation and recreation, that support a healthy riparian ecosystem. The trees help stabilize soils, reduce erosion, and reduce stormwater runoff to Clear Creek, which improves water quality. The increased canopy cover reduces the impact of the urban heat island effect by increasing shade. The Greenbelt trail improvements encourage more outdoor use by the Wheat Ridge and surrounding community and provide a space for children to explore nature.

The IES environmental education program provides an opportunity for local students to learn about the benefits of trees to their health while engaging in much needed outdoor activity. IES creates ecological workshops that focus on the importance of environmental stewardship, the benefits of trees for community health, and how working outdoors can be fun and beneficial. This program helps emotionally disadvantaged students to develop social skills with their peers through tree planting. For the Summer Sun day campers, the Tree Ambassadors program focuses on tree growth and the benefits of trees to local wildlife and to the community. The Tree Ambassador program provides a regular opportunity for campers to work outside and improve their local community. Both components of the project teach local students about the benefits of outdoor recreation, community service, and nature in their communities. Comments from Kullerstrand Elementary School student participants demonstrate the project's real impact.



IES Wheat Ridge Kullerstrand students and Tree Steward. Photo Credit: Carol Lyons



IES Wheat Ridge Summer Sun Camp Tree Ambassadors. Photo Credit: Carol Lyons

"Planting trees is very important because it helps us breathe." - Josiah
"I like planting and I just want to help our community." - Shaun
"I like the plants they look pretty and green, and I feel like they keep me safe." - Jaiden

The IES Wheat Ridge partnership supports the Wheat Ridge Parks and Recreation program to provide substantive opportunities in the community for recreation and outdoor access. Through the IES projects, an estimated 60 local children work outdoors every year to improve their local parks and open space. Twenty local adult volunteer Tree Stewards help water, weed, and care for the new plants as they establish and begin growing at the sites. The Stewards' and students' investment in improving the Greenbelt provides an incentive to visit the open space to showcase their hard work to friends and family. These opportunities give participants a sense of ownership of their local parks and a stake in their continued protection and improvement.



IES Wheat Ridge student planting day. Photo Credit: Carol Lyons



IES Wheat Ridge Greenbelt Kullerstrand students nature walk. Photo Credit: Carol Lyons

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Colorado State Forest Service
Urban and Community Forestry
<https://csfs.colostate.edu/forest-management/community-urban-forestry>
Institute for Environmental Solutions, The Tree Project, www.i4es.org