



Pre-Vernal BeltLine
Photo Credit: Thomas Cizauskas

A Forest Runs Through It: Atlanta, Georgia's BeltLine Arboretum

By Tim Beatley

The story of Atlanta's BeltLine is one well known to many and its success with the public so far has been huge. Eventually it will consist of a 22-mile loop around the center of Atlanta, utilizing historic railroad corridors to create an impressive multi-use trail system and (eventually) light rail transit. Few may know the story of the [BeltLine Arboretum](#), however, and the way this linear forest is shaping up to create an experience of nature for visitors to the trail.

The brainchild of Trees Atlanta Co-Executive Director Greg Levine, the idea was to convert the BeltLine into a unique, linear arboretum, bringing a biodiverse, bird- and wildlife-friendly forest to the center of the city, and making the

experience of walking or biking along the BeltLine a profoundly more natureful one. Trees Atlanta raised \$300,000 to fund the preparation of a concept plan that remains the guiding vision. A decade later the Arboretum consists of about 9 miles of the BeltLine's completed 10 miles or so, with Trees Atlanta planting a diverse palette of native trees and shrubs, as well as meadows and prairies in some locations.

According to Levine, the goal was in part to convert the BeltLine from a kind of "glamorized walking sidewalk," to a more nature-rich, natural experience, with the ability to perceive seasonal changes, to hear insects and other natural sounds in the evening, and to see and experience birds and wildlife.

To Levine this is about showing "how you can have a different kind of landscape in the city." Instead of the usual reliance on Bermuda grass, exotic shrubs and maybe two or three different species of trees, the arboretum is much different: there are hundreds of species, and a landscape supporting impressive biodiversity. A study by a researcher at Emory University of the Arboretum's native prairie found a much higher diversity and abundance of bees (7.8 and 3.5 times respectively) compared with areas planted in Bermuda grass.

There has been an emphasis on utilizing native trees and plants throughout, something Levine tells me has carried over into the planting plans for new

development or redevelopment nearby. As Levine explained, the goal of the arboretum is certainly to connect Atlantans to nature, but also "to be able to bring part of the BeltLine home."

There is little question that the arboretum has helped to educate about native plants and trees, and there are new housing projects nearby that have used mostly native species in their plantings. Levine mentions the Ponce Market as a positive example of a redevelopment project, right on the BeltLine, using mostly native plants.

These trees and greenery greatly enhance the quality of the Beltline as a pedestrian and public space. Nature helps propel us outside, helps to make the experience of walking more enjoyable. And as cities continue to heat up, arboretums like this one will help with essential urban cooling.

The BeltLine, including the arboretum, has been a phenomenal success. Some 1.7 million people use the eastside trail, not bad for an entire metro area of 5.6 million. Trees Atlanta is now fundraising for the next five miles of the Arboretum. Trees Atlanta has a big task caring for and maintaining all the trees on the trails, as well as coordinating volunteers, and training Arboretum docents who give guided tours.

Preserving the city's vaunted tree canopy continues to be a major challenge (Levine tells me it has been in decline, likely down to 47% or even less). More trees



BeltLine Biodiversity
Photo Credit: JD Brown

need planting, more forested lands need to be protected, and trees need to be more effectively taken into account and preserved during the process of development.

The city's tree ordinance is in revision and Levine is hopeful that it will emphasize efforts to take trees into account early in the development process. He cites the example of a new library where it was not until late in the design that the community realized the design would result in the cutting down of five large shade trees. With the right process, and with a greater commitment to trees, Levine

believes, this kind of outcome can be avoided in the future.

"Development needs to work within these [tree protection] parameters," Levine says, "and there is still a way to make money." Protecting trees will require "a line in the sand," and a stronger tree code is something a majority of Atlantans strongly support.

Resources:

Trees Atlanta. Atlanta Beltline Arboretum. <https://www.treesatlanta.org/programs/atlanta-beltline-arboretum>.