2026 Award Winners

Outstanding Individual

Patrick Gilbert, Chair, Western North Carolina Urban Forest Council

Patrick Gilbert with NCUFC Executive Director Kim Strazisar

The Outstanding Individual Award recognizes an individual/volunteer that has been instrumental in organizing or motivating urban forestry activities within a community. Nominees include community leaders, elected officials, exceptional volunteers, local non-profit organizers, and concerned citizens.

From Patrick's Nomination Entry: Patrick is currently serving as the Chair of the newly formed Western North Carolina Urban Forest Council. He was instrumental in starting this new group to address urban forestry education, management, and resilience in Western North Carolina. His tireless work and dedication in forming and maintaining this new group has already resulted in positive connections in the City of Asheville and with other non-profits in the state. He is a former Chair of the Asheville Urban Forestry Commission and volunteers his time to protect and promote urban forests in WNC and throughout the state.

2026 Award Winners

Outstanding Professional
Laurie Reid Dukes, City Arborist, City of Charlotte

Laurie Reid Dukes with NCUFC Executive Director Kim Strazisar

The Outstanding Professional Award recognizes an individual who works for an organization whose business is related to urban forestry (arboriculture, horticulture, nursery, grounds manager, etc.) who has made outstanding contributions to the urban forestry effort at the local, regional, or state level. Nominees include municipal foresters/arborists, private arborists, utility arborists, growers and educators.

From Laurie's Nomination Entry: Laurie Reid Dukes has dedicated her career to protecting and enhancing Charlotte's urban forest while inspiring others to become stewards of one of the community's greatest assets. As the City Arborist for Charlotte, she has demonstrated exceptional leadership by bringing together local government, nonprofit organizations, neighborhood groups, businesses, developers, utilities, arborists, and volunteers to preserve and expand the city's tree canopy.

Known as the "Crown of Charlotte," the urban forest is central to the city's identity, environmental health, and quality of life. Laurie has helped ensure Charlotte remains a Tree City USA while championing responsible growth that balances development with long-term tree preservation. Through her partnership with TreesCharlotte and other organizations, she has educated residents, organized volunteer tree plantings, and inspired thousands to value and care for Charlotte's trees.

Beyond her official responsibilities, Laurie is a mentor, educator, and trusted resource within North Carolina's urban forestry community. She shares her knowledge freely, encourages collaboration, and builds consensus among diverse stakeholders. Her ability to unite public agencies, private industry, nonprofit partners, and citizens has strengthened Charlotte's urban forest and serves as a model across the state.

Laurie exemplifies the spirit of the North Carolina Urban Forestry Outstanding Individual Award. Her leadership, service, and dedication have left a lasting impact on Charlotte and continue to inspire others to protect North Carolina's urban forests for generations to come.

2026 Award Winners

Outstanding Project

Keep Durham Beautiful - Invasive Plant Removal (IPR) Program

(from left to right) Keep Durham Beautiful Executive Director Tania Datuk, Keep Durham Beautiful Urban and Community Forestry Intern Roo Jackson, and NCUFC Executive Director Kim Strazisar

The Outstanding Project Award recognizes an outstanding single project which has made a positive impact on the urban forest. Particular consideration is given to projects that can be copied or adapted for use by other communities. Specifically, nominations result in significant enhancement of the urban forest; represent a significant change for the betterment of the resource; and have been completed during the last three years.

From the Project Nomination Form: KDB's IPR Program reimagines invasive species management as a community-powered, equity-centered strategic partnership to protect Durham's urban forest. Launched formally in 2024 with Durham Parks and Rec, Rewild Earth, and New Hope Bird Alliance, IPR grew from a single rained-out pilot into a robust, recurring program. To date, the program has engaged 1,649 volunteers, logged 3,145 service hours, and cleared over 3.5 million sq.ft. of invasive plants across 33 parks and under-resourced sites in Durham, restoring conditions native trees need to regenerate.

In addition, KDB co-sponsored updating the "Controlling Invasive Plants" Manual with New Hope Bird Alliance and NC Botanical Garden, and is producing a Spanish-language version to reach residents and professionals. KDB holds IPR trainings and wrote a Volunteer Leader Guide to standardize best practices as the program now runs at least three events monthly. KDB also developed a brochure and game, and installed informational signage at project sites, educating the public on invasive species and restoration underway.

The program's scalability is central to its impact: a low-cost, volunteer-coordination model adaptable for other NC communities without large forestry budgets. KDB maintains and loans tools and protective equipment and coordinates debris management. KDB has invested in program durability by formalizing a research partnership with Duke's Nicholas School of the Environment (26-27) for GIS mapping and ecological analysis, securing Burt's Bees Foundation funding for a part-time coordinator and tool-library supplementation, and piloting native understory replanting with NC Master Naturalists.

IPR stands out for its measurable canopy protection, equity-driven site selection, and replicable model. It has bettered Durham's urban forest and offers a template other communities can replicate.

2026 Award Winners

Outstanding Project

NCSU Campus Urban Wood Utilization Program

The Outstanding Project Award recognizes an outstanding single project which has made a positive impact on the urban forest. Particular consideration is given to projects that can be copied or adapted for use by other communities. Specifically, nominations result in significant enhancement of the urban forest; represent a significant change for the betterment of the resource; and have been completed during the last three years.

From the Project Nomination Form: The Campus Urban Wood Utilization Program is a student-centered sustainability initiative that repurposes wood from trees removed on NC State's campus into educational materials for courses, design studios, and hands-on making environments.

Each year, trees are removed due to age, decline, storm damage, or campus development. While necessary for public safety, these removals often result in valuable hardwood being chipped or landfilled. This program reframes tree removals as educational assets. Salvaged logs are selectively retained, milled, dried, and incorporated into academic coursework through the College of Design and programming at the NC State Craft Center, with wood science support from the College of Natural Resources' Wood Products Extension and Wood Products Laboratory.

Students engage directly with the full lifecycle of campus materials—from removal and recovery to processing and fabrication—gaining firsthand experience with circular economy principles and sustainable material management. Many of these trees have stood for generations, shaping campus identity. Through this initiative, salvaged trees are transformed into lasting educational materials, furniture, and design elements that carry forward their legacy.

Led and managed by NC State Landscape Maintenance and Operations, the program coordinates tree selection, material handling, and logistics. It leverages existing campus infrastructure and partnerships, including the Compost Facility and Research Cooperative, the College of Design, Waste Reduction and Recycling, and the NC State Craft Center. Sustainability Fund support enables coordination and student programming rather than large capital investments, establishing a scalable model for embedding sustainability into coursework and preserving campus tree legacies.