

NATURE-SMART LIBRARIES

Case Study: Austin, Texas



Photo credits: Austin Public Library and the City of Austin

INTRODUCTION

Austin's Nature-Smart Libraries (NSL) initiative aims to “foster connections to nature through stories, experiences, and resources to promote curiosity and environmental literacy.” The initiative focuses on 1) promoting environmental literacy and stewardship, 2) increasing equitable access to nature, and 3) enhancing library spaces to improve community health outcomes.

Leveraging data from a Nature Equity Map and a library-specific assessment of natural richness, the Austin Public Library (APL) system identified areas with limited nature access and allocated resources to address nature access disparities. With a Central Library, 20 neighborhood branches, the Austin History Center, and Recycled Reads, APL's used bookstore and home to the Tool Library, Austin's libraries are well-positioned to expand nature access and advance equity.

NATURE-SMART LIBRARIES IN ACTION

Austin has significantly invested in staff, resources, and facilities to embed nature into library programming, physical spaces, and community engagement. Through these comprehensive efforts, Austin libraries are not just places for information; they have transformed into vital community hubs that promote a deep appreciation for nature and foster engagement with the outdoor world.

Nature Programming

- **Core Programming:** Nature programming is embedded into core programming, including storytimes, playtimes, and book clubs offered year-round across library locations.
- **Seasonal & Heritage Month Programming:** Special events, including summer programs and heritage month activities, celebrate cultural connections to nature.
- **Passive Programming:** Take-home Nature Kits and self-guided activities encourage exploration outside the library.
- **Partner-Led Programming:** Outdoor activities like biking, yoga, scavenger hunts, and sustainable living workshops on gardening, composting, and zero-waste practices are offered in collaboration with partners.
- **Special Collaborations:** Partnerships with organizations like NASA bring science and nature together through hands-on learning and STEM-focused programs.

Collections and Lending

- **StoryWalks® Initiatives:** Four library branches now feature StoryWalks®, including an accessible installation at Windsor Park, which includes braille features for greater inclusivity. APL also partners with local conservancy groups to bring pop-up StoryWalks® to trails across the city.
- **STEM Nature Kits & Backpacks:** Hands-on kits, including a Birding Backpack (with Travis Audubon Society) and a STEM Bat Kit (with Bat Conservation International), are available for checkout, as well as loose parts kits for sensory exploration.
- **Seed Libraries:** APL's seed libraries offer free seasonal seeds to support home gardening and food literacy. Many locations also host community seed swaps, encouraging neighbors to share, learn, and grow together.
- **Tool Library:** Located at Recycled Reads, the tool library lends tools for gardening, DIY, and sustainability projects.
- **Sports Equipment Checkout:** Select library branches offer sports equipment like balls, jump ropes, and frisbees for checkout, encouraging children to get active and play in the green fields and open spaces surrounding the library.

Natural Spaces

- **Physical Improvements:** Recent enhancements include the creation of pollinator gardens, resilient outdoor spaces, and tree plantings to foster a closer connection to nature.
- **Natural & Sustainable Spaces:** APL integrates nature into library facilities with features like native landscaping and outdoor learning areas. Sustainability is a priority in facility improvements, with renovations including energy-efficient HVAC systems, rainwater collection systems, solar panels, and electric vehicle charging stations to reduce environmental impact and support a greener future.

PARTNERSHIPS

The success of Austin's NSL initiative is rooted in strong partnerships with city departments and community organizations, including:

- Austin Public Library
- Austin Parks & Recreation Department
- Austin Public Health
- Watershed Protection Department
- Development Services Department - Urban Forestry Program
- Texas Talking Book Program and StoryWalk®

Local nature-based partners and a dedicated collaboration between APL staff and Austin's Cities Connecting Children to Nature (CCCN) team have been instrumental in the success of the city's NSL strategy. The two leads have made sure to align NSL goals with the library's strategic plan and with the City's parks plans. They have also led efforts to ensure ongoing cross-departmental support.

AMPLIFYING AND SUSTAINING THE WORK

Austin is committed to its Nature Smart Library (NSL) initiative by purposefully integrating nature-based programming and infrastructure into its existing frameworks. The central goal is to harmonize NSL strategies with current city work plans, strategies, and budgets. This includes:

- Aligning NSL strategies with the Austin Public Library's (APL) strategic plan by pinpointing impact areas and embedding a nature-focused perspective into daily operations.
- Forming cross-functional teams that bring together staff from programming, facilities, partnerships, and collections to collaboratively plan, implement, and oversee nature-focused projects across the library system.
- Securing funding for NSL initiatives through APL's general budget while reallocating resources to encourage nature-based programming. Additional financial support is provided by the Texas State Library and IMLS grants, potential wellness grants and internal urban forestry funding.
- Utilizing staff resources for partner-led programs, ensuring the integration of nature programming within existing workflows.
- Updating existing facilities and designing new library branches with nature connections in mind.