

Vegetation Terms

Knowing the terms often used in discussions about protecting or increasing the green infrastructure of a community will help you communicate and engage in these issues with other leaders and experts. The following are terms you may encounter:

Annual: a plant that lives one year or season. Pansies, zinnias and petunias are annuals.

Arborist: a professional in the practice of arboriculture or the cultivation, management and study of individual trees, shrubs, vines and other perennial woody plants.

Bioretention: vegetated area designed to intercept and treat stormwater.

Biota: all the living organisms of a particular area; the combined flora and fauna of a region.

Canopy: the top layer of leaves, branches and stems of trees.

Conservation Subdivision: residential developments with common open space and clustered compact lots. Their purpose is to protect farmland and natural resources while allowing for the maximum number of residences under community zoning and subdivision regulations.

Deciduous: a tree or plant that loses its foliage at the end of the growing season.

Environment: the physical, chemical and biotic factors that act upon an organism or ecological community and ultimately determine its form and survival.

Evergreen: a tree or plant that keeps its foliage throughout the year.

Fauna: the animals characteristic of a region.

Flora: the plant life characteristic of a region.

Forest: a dense growth of trees plants and underbrush covering a large area.



Landscaping can reduce air conditioning costs, buffer bothersome noises, treat and reduce stormwater runoff, and increase property value. (Photo: Gloria Putnam/North Carolina Sea Grant)

Green Infrastructure: the interconnected green space network that is planned and managed for its natural resource values and for the associated benefits it provides.

Green Roof: roof of a building covered with a layer of vegetation.

Green Space: loosely used term for undeveloped land — such as a park or greenway — that separates, surrounds or is within intensive residential or industrial areas and is used and maintained for recreational enjoyment.

Greenbelt: an area of largely undeveloped, wild or agricultural land surrounding or neighboring an urban area.

Greenway: relatively undeveloped land that generally has a linear character and may run through, instead of around, an urban area, and usually includes a trail.

Habitat: the place or environment where plants and animals naturally or normally live and grow. Every organism has a unique habitat made up of what it needs to survive including water, sun, land, vegetation, temperature, food, shelter and refuge from predators.

Habitat Fragmentation: a habitat that is broken into small sections, such as occurs when a major road is built through a wooded area.

Herbaceous: a plant with little or no woody tissue and usually persists for a single growing season.



Invasive Plant: plant that tends to spread or invade and is a threat to ecosystems because of its ability to outcompete native plant communities. Common non-native invasive plants include: kudzu (*Pueraria montana*), Russian olive (*Elaeagnus angustifolia*), English ivy (*Hedera helix*), Chinese privet (*Ligustrum sinense*), beach vitex (*Vitex rotundifolia*), and common reed (*Phragmites australis*).

Landscape: the landforms of a region taken as a whole.

Low Impact Development (LID): usually refers to development designed so the amount of stormwater runoff from a site does not increase after construction, or designed to minimize impacts to the natural resources on a site. LID usually increases preservation and establishment of vegetation on a site.

Native or Indigenous: growing, living or occurring naturally in a particular area.

Natural Area: in a developed area, can be a space that does not contain an intensely maintained landscape, such as a lawn or garden, or an area that is relatively undisturbed and exemplifies typical flora and fauna of the region.

Non-native or Exotic: plants that are not normally found in North Carolina but have been introduced by human activities.

Open Space: an undeveloped area. Sometimes parks or trails are referred to as open space.

Ornamental Plant: plant that is grown for its ornamental features including flowers, bark, scent or structure.

Perennial: a plant that lives for several years. Herbaceous perennials survive winter and drought as underground roots, rhizomes, bulbs, corms or tubers. Woody perennials, including vines, shrubs and trees, usually stop growing during winter and drought. Asters, irises, daffodils and hydrangeas are familiar garden perennials.

Plant Community: the associated plant species that form the natural vegetation of any place. For instance, a midlatitude forest is comprised of a community of trees, shrubs, ferns, grasses and flowering herbs.

Shrub or bush: plant distinguished from a tree by its multiple stems and lower height.

Understory: layer of smaller trees and shrubs below the canopy.

Urban Forestry: the care and management of trees in urban settings to improve the urban environment. This can include trees along streets, trees within a park, or a private or public forested area affected by urban and suburban surroundings.

Vegetated Riparian Buffer: a naturally vegetated zone adjacent to the shoreline of a stream, river, lake or estuary.

Vegetation: plant life or total plant cover of an area.

Wildlife: animals, especially mammals, birds and fishes, that are neither human nor domesticated.

Information for this document was drawn from:

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