



A Toolkit for Creating a Tree Appreciation Program on Your AISD Campus

By Keira Boehle, McCallum High School, Class of 2022
and Intern with the City of Austin's Youth Forest Council in 2021

1. Research:

- Look at the trees on your campus. Decide which ones you want to showcase with identification signage or plaques. Keep the number manageable, because making plaques can be expensive. If you want to keep it a purely digital project, feel free to do as many as you want. *For instance, at McCallum, I decided to limit the project to the 18 heritage trees on campus, which left out several notable large sycamore trees, but this could allow future students to expand the signage scope with their own projects.*
- Walk the campus to check the soil that around the trees to see if it is possible to dig. Look to see if it is concrete bound because you may want to omit those. If the tree is concrete bound, it is not impossible to install a sign, you just have to be careful not to hit roots.
- Here is the link to the AISD's GIS Map and list of trees that you will need to identify your campus trees. Make sure you double check the identifications visually though because there can be some mislabeled-trees. https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/1THJdK-663Yse_TtYa4aize0-1MwVOnq- and if you cant find what you are looking for here, you can contact Matthew Mears, AISD's Forester. Matthew.mears@austinisd.org
- Also make sure you greenlight digging in campus soil with your principal or other authorities before launching the project. *For instance, I spoke with my principal and the head landscaper for the campus to be sure they gave permission for the project.*

2. Plan:

- Make sure you set out a clear budget because prices can stack up. *My supply list is laid out here and includes all materials that I used to produce and install 18 plaques as well as their costs in the links.*

Untreated Wood (because treated wood leaches toxins into the dirt)

- Three boards measuring 1 inch x 6 inches x 6 feet (which later were cut into eighteen 1 foot lengths)

<https://www.homedepot.com/p/1-in-x-6-in-x-6-ft-Premium-Kiln-Dried-Square-Edge-Whitewood-Common-Board-914762/100015248>

- Eighteen stakes measuring 2 inches x 2 inches x 24 inches

<https://www.homedepot.com/p/2-in-x-2-in-x-24-in-Grade-Stake-6-Pack-466120/202297473>

Screws (I tried nails at first and they were way too difficult – nails can help with starting a pilot hole for the electric drill though)

- 2-inch screws like this

https://www.homedepot.com/p/Grip-Rite-8-x-2-in-Phillips-Bugle-Head-Coarse-Thread-Sharp-Point-Polymer-Coated-Exterior-Screws-1-lb-Pack-PTN2S1/100197689?MERCH=REC_-searchViewed_-NA_-100197689_-N

Paint (I used paint I already had at home, leftover from other projects)

- Outdoor primer for a base coat

<https://www.homedepot.com/p/KILZ-2-ALL-PURPOSE-1-Gal-White-Interior-Exterior-Multi-Surface-Primer-Sealer-and-Stain-Blocker-20941/100096395>

- Spray paint (I used a blue, a turquoise, and a lime green with a gloss finish)

<https://www.homedepot.com/p/Rust-Oleum-Painter-s-Touch-2X-12-oz-Gloss-Seaside-General-Purpose-Spray-Paint-334050/307244841>

- Acrylic paints (I used a variety of colors for the lettering on the signs)



<https://www.homedepot.com/p/FolkArt-Multi-Surface-Paint-Set-12-Pack-PROMO830/301434511>

- Clear wood sealer spray

<https://www.homedepot.com/p/Olympic-WaterGuard-11-oz-Clear-Wood-Sealer-Spray-55260XIS-54/306321405>

Brochures and Party Supplies (optional)

- Paper and color printer (or outsource to someplace like Office Depot)

- Cookies, napkins, and butcher paper to make signs for your showcase event

- Pick a platform for creating a brochure that includes a map of campus and the location and information about the trees. Some options could be Canva, PowerPoint, Google slides, or Photoshop. You could keep the brochure in digital format or print it out as well and put it in your school office for visitors. *I used Canva to make a two page, bi-fold brochure called "McCallum's Urban Forest: A Heritage Tree Guide." I printed 50 copies in color, used them in the showcase event, and left the rest in the front office.*

3. **Produce:**

- Once you have gathered your materials, make sure you have access to some sort of saw to cut your boards to proper length (I recommend an electric table saw) and a posthole digger for putting the signposts into the ground. If you do not own these tools, ask around your school community for loaners. Your tech theatre department or woodshop may be able to lend you tools. Neighbors can also be a resource. *Our film teacher helped me cut the boards with his electric table saw after school one day and I borrowed a posthole digger from an art teacher for two weeks.*
- I suggest assembling the signs before painting to insure you don't mess up the paint job later, but if you need to paint first, mark where your screws will go so you can avoid it while painting.
- On the signs, you can put the common and scientific name of the tree and leave it at that, or you can personalize them by gathering name suggestions from a schoolwide survey for school-appropriate names. Community input makes the plaques more engaging and fun. *I sent out my schoolwide survey via a BLEND announcement and received over 100 name suggestions, from which I chose 18.*
- If you don't consider yourself an artistic person, find students at your school who are. Go to your art classes and ask the art teacher if the students would be willing to help with your project. Don't be afraid if the signs don't look perfect -- the charm comes from them looking like a student made them. *I am an officer of our environmental club and art club, so I made it an official project of both groups and enlisted help of my classmates.*
- When painting the actual signpost, make sure that the part of the stake that is going to be in the ground is unpainted to prevent the paint leeching into the soil. *On my two-foot stakes, I marked off a foot from the bottom of the stake with a strip of painters tape and painted the top foot with a base coat of primer then a colorful spray paint. I primed and sprayed the plaque boards as well.*
- Once your boards and posts are painted, assembling the plaques will be a lot easier if you have an electric drill. Level your board with the top of the post (to avoid making look like a gravestone cross) and put two screws in place. You can stagger the screws if you are worried that the wood will split, but if you have the right thickness, you will be fine. Also note that getting the right length of screws is crucial. Have the screw be $\frac{3}{4}$ the width of the wood you are drilling into, to make sure it goes through both pieces, but not poking out of the wood causing a safety hazard. *My art history teacher helped me screw the boards to the posts with her electric drill.*



- After assembling the plaques, paint the tree identification information on the board. When the paint is dry, spray the painted parts with a waterproof sealant to ensure the paint won't wear too quickly with time. *I gathered members of the environmental club and art club to have a painting party after school. Each student got to personalize their tree board and post with additional illustrations, boarder designs, and lettering styles. It took about 4 hours afterschool over 2 to get the wood screwed together and get lettering done.*
- The brochure can have more information about the trees that can't fit on the plaques. You can use fun facts about the species, location, or the history of trees on your campus. Keep things short, but educational and interesting. *On my brochure, I put the tree's nickname given by the school community, its common name, its scientific name, and a fun fact about trees in general.* You can use the City of Austin's website for collecting your facts. It has many journals and articles explaining the interesting and important things trees can do. <https://www.austintexas.gov/page/urban-forest-youth-education>

4. **Execute:**

- Once the sealant on the plaques has cured, you can start to put them in the ground. When finding a place to dig, make sure it is at least 8-10 feet away from the base of the tree, to avoid the critical root zone. Make your holes with the posthole digger, get someone to teach you proper technique, or watch a tutorial, because digging holes is not easy, but not impossible. Dig about a foot into the soil, if you hit a big root, wire, concrete, or stone, shift your hole a little to see if you can avoid that area, if not, find a new hole or just put the plaque into the hole, it's okay if some of the raw wood peaks out, because we want to avoid paint leeching into soil. And you can always do touch-ups later.
- Once your brochure has all your chosen trees and information listed in it, you can either print them at a print shop, which is the more expensive option, or you can use your school printer. A more high-tech paperless option could be to use QR codes shellacked onto the tree plaque that could link to a website that holds the tree information. That could be more cost effective if you have the know-how. QR code generators can be found for free on the internet and there are tools for free or low-cost websites. Another pro to using QR codes is that the brochure can be accessible to all who have a smartphone, so you don't have to keep printing copies of a paper brochure. *I printed my brochures at home and at a print shop when my ink ran out.*
- Getting people interested and interacting with the project. This can be done in several ways:
 - Showcase event with free food to lure students
 - Teachers taking their classes on a tour of the school
 - Offering to take your own classes on a tour of the school
 - Letting your science teachers (biology, chem, environmental science, aquatic science, earth science etc.) know about this so they can incorporate it into their lessons
 - Or you can simply let the signs be appreciated passively and be a part of the daily life on campus, but I suggest telling people about it because people will be curious.

I held a showcase event at lunchtime, offering free cookies to students who came by my table and told them about the project, explained what it is for, and showed them the brochure I made. I also distributed the physical brochures around campus and in the front office for people.

- Once officially done with advertising your project, pat yourself on the back. You did it!