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Outstanding tree care professionals, projects recognized at 2023 Texas Tree Conference

WACO, Texas — Texas A&M Forest Service and the Texas Chapter of the International Society of Arboriculture (ISAT) recognized the Texas Community Forestry Award winners at the 43rd annual Texas Tree Conference in Waco, Texas.

Keith Babberney was named the 2023 Texas Arborist of the Year.

Each year, an outstanding individual is awarded the Texas Arborist of the Year award recognizing their contributions to arboriculture and community forestry. Nominees are evaluated for their leadership, commitment, innovation, impact and sustainability.
Keith Babberney has been a leader in Texas arboriculture for decades. He also continually goes above and beyond for the arboriculturist community in Texas by volunteering as a judge at the Texas Tree Climbing Competition, serving on Austin's Urban Forestry Board and contributing regularly to the ISAT In the Shade newsletter.

After being in the tree care industry for years, Babberney shifted to municipal forestry to share his knowledge and expertise with a new audience. He has presented information to countless neighborhood groups and associations and has transformed difficult technical information into understandable and impactful content for communities through blog posts, social media and extensive email correspondence.

The 2023 Award for Outstanding Landscape Improvement was awarded to the Texas Trees Foundation for the Branching Out program.

The award recognizes individuals, organizations or municipalities that have made significant contributions through tree planting, care and landscaping which enhances environmental protection, conservation, beautification, energy conservation or wildlife protection with significant impact over the years.

Since 2018, the Texas Trees Foundation has partnered with the City of Dallas Park and Recreation Department to improve the aging tree canopy of Dallas through the Branching Out program. Twelve parks scattered across the city are selected each year to receive 50 new trees each, around 600 trees per year.

While Dallas has a fairly large tree canopy, much of the canopy is comprised of aging trees. Natural aging combined with increasingly frequent droughts, freezes and other climate issues could result in a decrease in this canopy coverage. The Branching Out program is one way to help make sure Dallas can maintain its large canopy coverage for future generations.

The program draws corporate groups, neighborhood associations, churches and individuals interested in bettering their environment and learning about trees. The planting events often draw upwards of 100 people to volunteer and learn how to properly plant trees.

The 2023 Arboricultural Project of the Year Award recipient was Tree Mann Solution for their work on the Eastside Commerce Center.

The award recognizes a specific tree care, protection or planting project that exemplifies modern arboricultural practices and customer service.

The Eastside Commerce Center site in Austin, Texas had over 1700 trees, 80 of which are "heritage" trees, or trees of a select desirable species with a diameter of at least 24 feet.

Over 2 years, Tree Mann Solutions and a local team analyzed the site to understand the challenges and opportunities the trees presented to the overall design, permit issuance and construction budget and logistics. Over $1 million was invested to relocate seven large live oak trees at an average diameter of 36 feet anywhere from 100 to 1200 feet across the site to maintain compliance while achieving necessary yields and allowing these stunning trees better public visibility and enjoyment. A conservation area of around two acres was also set aside to preserve approximately 40 heritage trees along with several hundred additional regulated and understory trees.

The 2023 Outstanding Community Forestry Program Award recipient is Keep McAllen Beautiful.

The award recognizes individuals, organizations or municipalities that have promoted community forestry through a program that significantly engages, educates or enhances the community.

The City of McAllen, a Tree City USA since 2020, is booming in growth and has undertaken numerous initiatives to expand, improve, maintain and educate residents regarding its tree canopy. Keep McAllen Beautiful is a non-profit corporation affiliated with Keep Texas Beautiful and Keep America Beautiful, Inc., the nation's largest volunteer-based community action and education organization. In order to maintain both existing and newly planted trees more effectively, Keep McAllen Beautiful's volunteer board has developed programs to expand the city's tree canopy, facilitate "tree adoptions", assist community residents in assessing tree issues and educate them on appropriate tree care.

To expand the urban canopy in a growing community, Keep McAllen Beautiful has assisted the City of McAllen in implementing its urban forest grant, which focuses on public spaces in and around the city in which to establish small forests. Keep McAllen Beautiful provides volunteers to help plant the trees, which are usually quite large, and assists with monitoring their well-being. Other efforts include trees planted for restoration projects, such as the one at Escandon Park to mitigate storm damage and another at Garcia Park to restore a memorial citrus grove decimated by the recent freeze.

Award recipients were given a framed, limited edition, remarked print of a famous Texas tree by artist Ronnie Wells from Salado, Texas for their outstanding achievement.