

Engaging private residential tree owners in Wausau

Insights from the Wisconsin Urban Landowner Survey



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WAUSAU'S URBAN FOREST

In Wisconsin, private urban landowners play an important role in promoting the health and resilience of urban forests. A majority of Wisconsin's urban trees grow in residential areas (69%), providing tens of millions of dollars in ecosystem services for the people who live and work in Wisconsin's cities and suburbs (Nowak et al., 2017). The City of Wausau has a tree canopy cover of almost 30%, amounting to about 379 m² of tree canopy for every resident. In comparison, the statewide tree canopy cover for urban areas is almost 29%. As a whole, the diversity of tree species that comprise Wisconsin's total urban tree canopy is greater than the diversity of its public street trees, further underscoring the important role of private lands in maintaining a healthy and resilient urban forest (Nowak et al., 2017; Cumming et al., 2008).

USING SURVEY INSIGHTS TO IMPROVE LANDOWNER OUTREACH

To better understand the perceptions, attitudes and behaviors of Wisconsin's private residential urban landowners, the Wisconsin Urban Landowner Survey was sent in early 2017 to 6,000 landowners across four Wisconsin metro areas: Milwaukee, Madison, Green Bay and Wausau. The primary decision-maker for managing the trees and green space for each property was invited to complete the survey. Key findings from Wausau respondents are highlighted in this brief with a focus on single-family homeowners, who represent 90% of the 430 survey respondents from Wausau.

The first step in the landowner outreach process is to understand their attitudes toward urban trees. This includes the relative importance of the perceived benefits and concerns around tree care and landowners' preferred sources of information about tree care. Using this information, urban forestry professionals can design targeted messages that more effectively reach and motivate landowners to be active stewards of their trees. Whether professionals choose to communicate with landowners using direct mail, social media or face-to-face engagement, this brief can provide initial insights, including:

- Which tree benefits should I feature as part of my messaging?
- What are homeowners **most** concerned about when deciding to plant trees?
- Who is **best** positioned to deliver a message to homeowners in my area?
- Who is **most willing** to volunteer in my community or **most likely** to plant a tree on their property?

RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS: WAUSAU SINGLE-FAMILY HOMEOWNERS (386 RESPONDENTS)

Wausau survey respondents are primarily white (95%), male (71%) and are in their late 50s on average (Figure 2). The

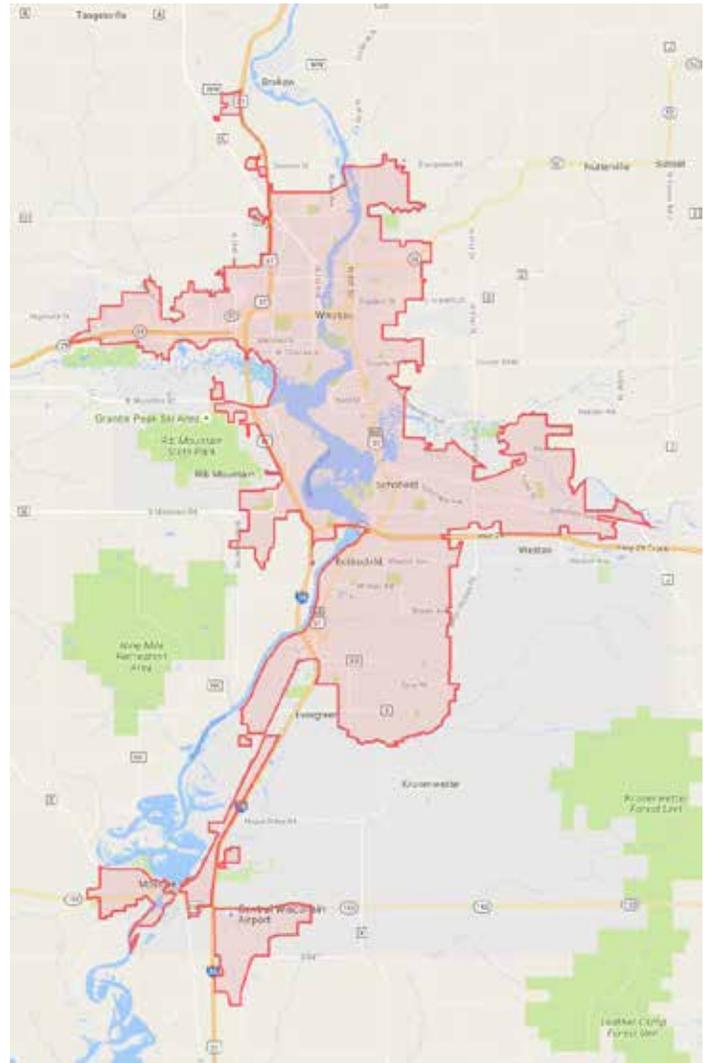


Figure 1. Wausau city and suburban sample area.

largest proportion earn \$50,000-\$99,000 (40%), and 42% have a bachelor's or advanced degree.

36% of respondents own more than 1 acre (Figure 3), and 38% own 35 or more trees:

- The median property size is .75 acres.
- For respondents within Wausau city limits, the average property size is .6 acres.

Insight: In comparison to other urban areas surveyed, Wausau respondents generally own larger properties (>1 acres) and have more trees on their properties. Given the demographics of the respondents, more research is needed before generalizing these survey results to engage minority or low-income homeowners or to engage residents who live in multi-family units.

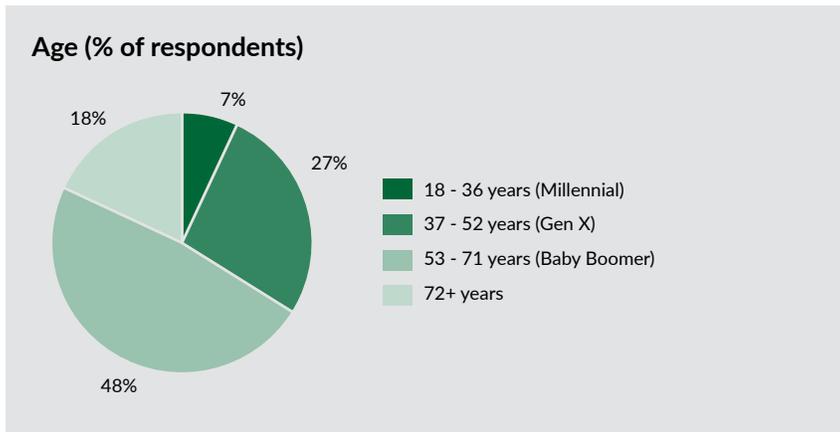


Figure 2. Wausau area respondents by age.

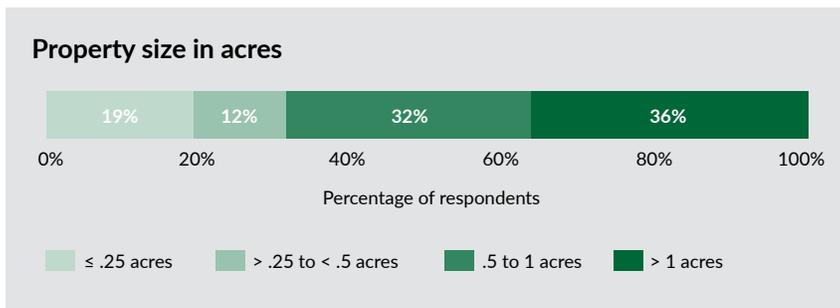


Figure 3. Property size in acres of Wausau area respondents.

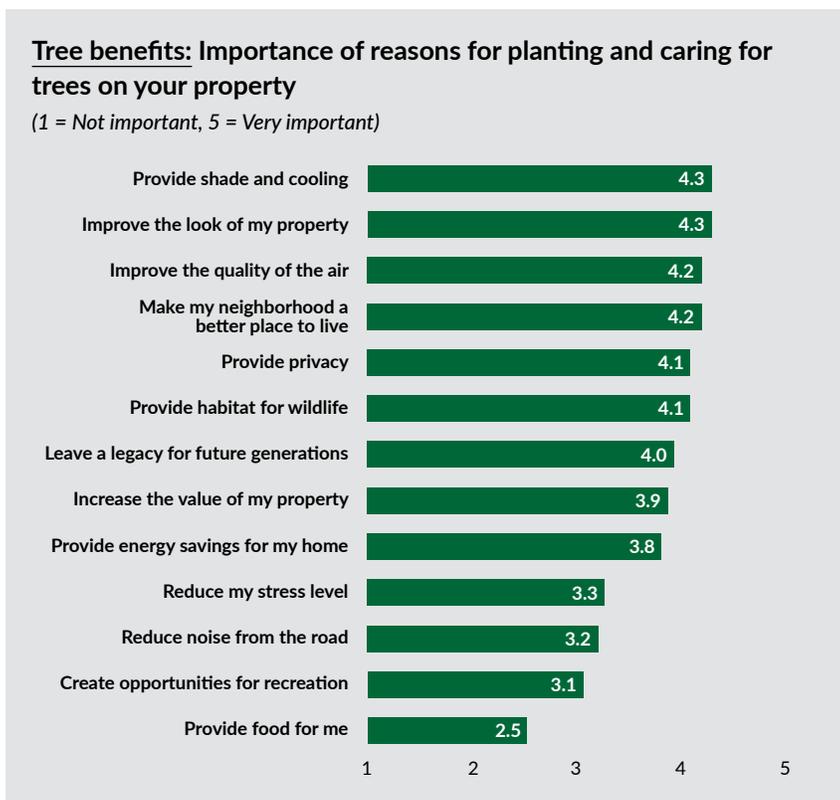


Figure 4. Wausau area respondents' perceived level of importance of the benefits provided by trees.

PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF PLANTING AND CARING FOR TREES

Overall, Wausau area respondents have a very positive perception of the trees where they live. They generally view the trees on their property as beneficial, and over 80% of respondents feel that the quality and number of trees in their neighborhood are good or very good.

The top five reasons respondents plant and care for trees on their property are to (Figure 4):

1. Provide shade and cooling
2. Improve the look of their property
3. Improve the quality of the air
4. Make their neighborhood a better place to live
5. Provide privacy

Respondents who place greater importance on the benefits of their trees show a greater intention to plant trees on their property and support urban forestry programs.

Insight: Framing messages around the benefits that are **most important** to homeowners can help tip the balance in favor of a pro-tree action as they weigh tree benefits against their concerns about the particular action, such as planting a large-growing tree near their home.

PERCEIVED CONCERNS ABOUT TREES ON THEIR PROPERTY

Wausau area respondents are most concerned about potential property damage from trees growing on their property (Figure 5). Almost half of the respondents report serious concern about trees and branches breaking and damaging their property (47%), and more than a third are concerned about tree roots interfering with building foundations, pipes or pavement (38%).

Respondents who own property in the city limits show greater levels of concern about the trees on their property than suburban respondents.

Insight: Messaging about trees must address homeowners' concerns, particularly for city homeowners where the concerns may be a barrier to planting new trees. Messaging could promote specific, actionable tree care options, such as pruning (rather than tree removal), properly planting and placing trees and choosing tree species that reduce perceived risks while providing benefits.

Tree concerns: Level of concern about potential tree issues on your property

(1 = No concern, 5 = Great concern)

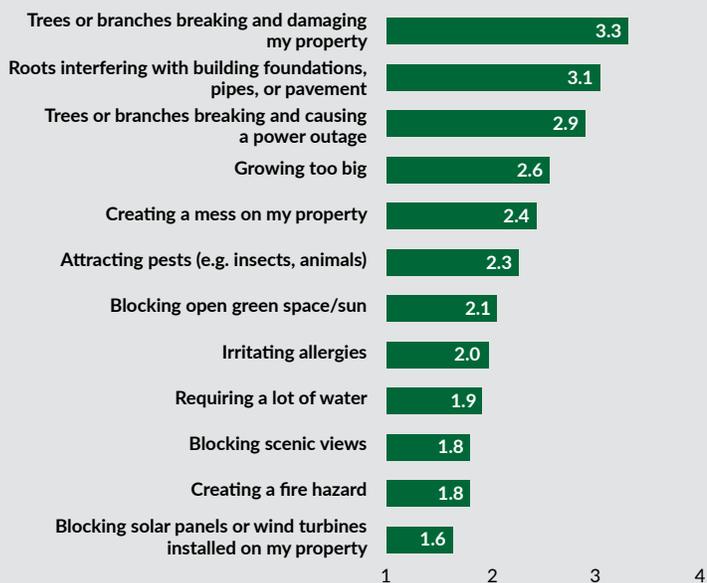


Figure 5. Wausau area respondents' perceived level of concern about the tree issues on their properties.

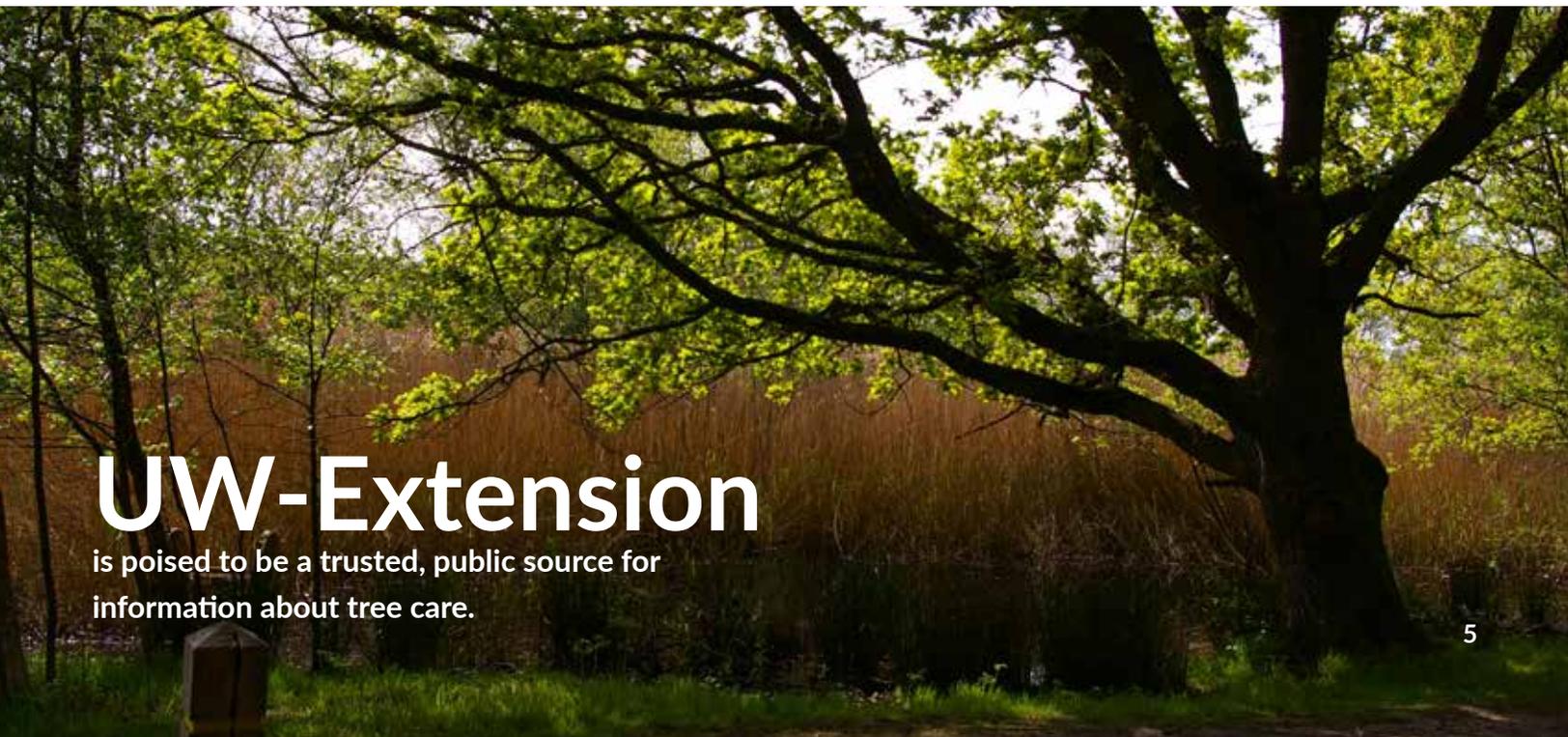
PREFERRED SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT TREE CARE

The largest proportion of Wausau area respondents (54%) say they **trust** private sector professionals for information about caring for or planting trees on their property (Figure 6). This is followed by trust in family and friends (44%). Similarly, the largest proportions of respondents say they **have talked** to private sector professionals (27%), family and friends (30%) and neighbors (28%) in the past year for advice about caring for their trees and green space.

In a separate survey question, when asked about their familiarity with the services provided by different types of professionals, Wausau area respondents report they are **more familiar** with private tree care and landscape professionals (26% are very or extremely familiar), compared to Extension educators (10%) and municipal tree care professionals (13%).

When asked **how they prefer to receive information** about tree care, Wausau area respondents strongly prefer receiving information by talking to someone (56%), followed by reading print materials (46%) and browsing the Internet or social media (41%).

Insight: To be most effective, outreach efforts should consider partnering with the private sector and community groups to disperse information and messages. UW-Extension is also poised to be a trusted, public source for information about tree care in comparison to other non-profit and public sources.



UW-Extension
is poised to be a trusted, public source for information about tree care.



Who do you trust and who have you talked with in the past year for information or advice about caring for your trees and green space?

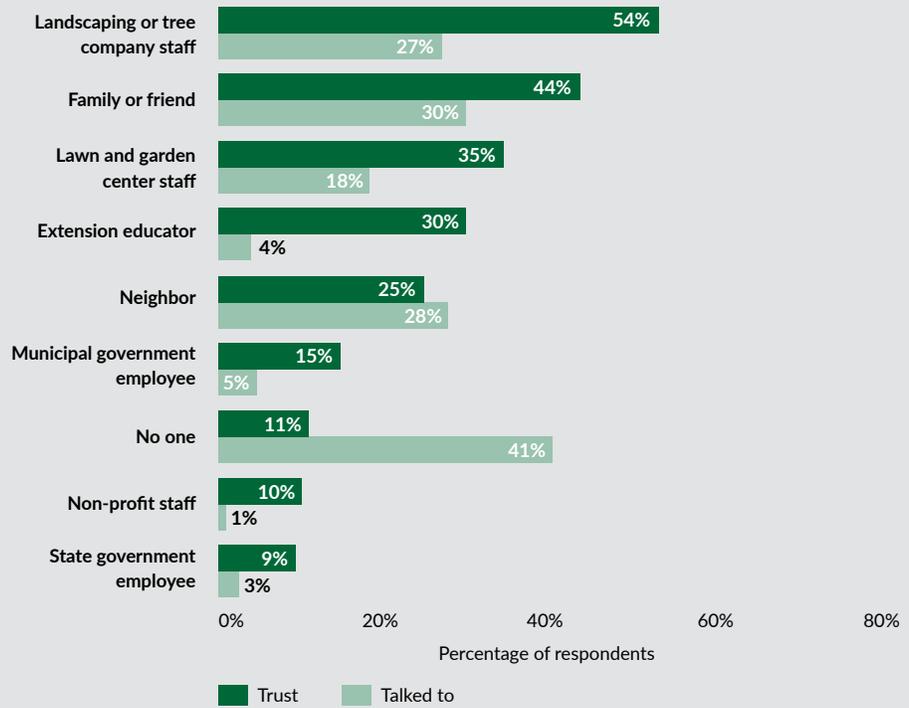


Figure 6. Comparison of Wausau area respondents' trusted sources of information about tree and green space care and who they have talked to in the past.

WILLINGNESS TO SUPPORT URBAN TREE CARE PROGRAMS

Similar to other urban areas, few Wausau area respondents express a willingness to support urban tree care programs by paying a tax or fee, donating money or volunteering (Figure 7).

- Respondents who own larger properties (> 1 acre) are significantly less willing to pay a tax or fee or donate money to support urban tree programs.
- Millennials (ages 36 and under) are more willing to volunteer than older generations.

Meanwhile, only 23% of respondents say they are strongly interested in **participating in a program** that would help cover the expense of planting or caring for trees on their property.

***Insight:** It may be that support for and interest in tree care programs is low because people may not perceive a need for them. Indeed, on average, respondents are very satisfied with the number and quality of trees in their neighborhood. Further studies are needed to more fully understand homeowners' openness to specific urban forestry programs.*

Marketing for any program should be attentive to different audiences' openness to community programs. For example, messages about volunteering might be designed to reach

Millennials, who appear more interested in volunteer opportunities. Messages might also be tailored for homeowners who have larger properties and live farther from the city center, appealing to their attitudes and beliefs to build their interest in urban tree care programs. Furthermore, it may be helpful to obtain a more thorough understanding of the homeowners who express a willingness to donate and target marketing initiatives to these willing homeowners.

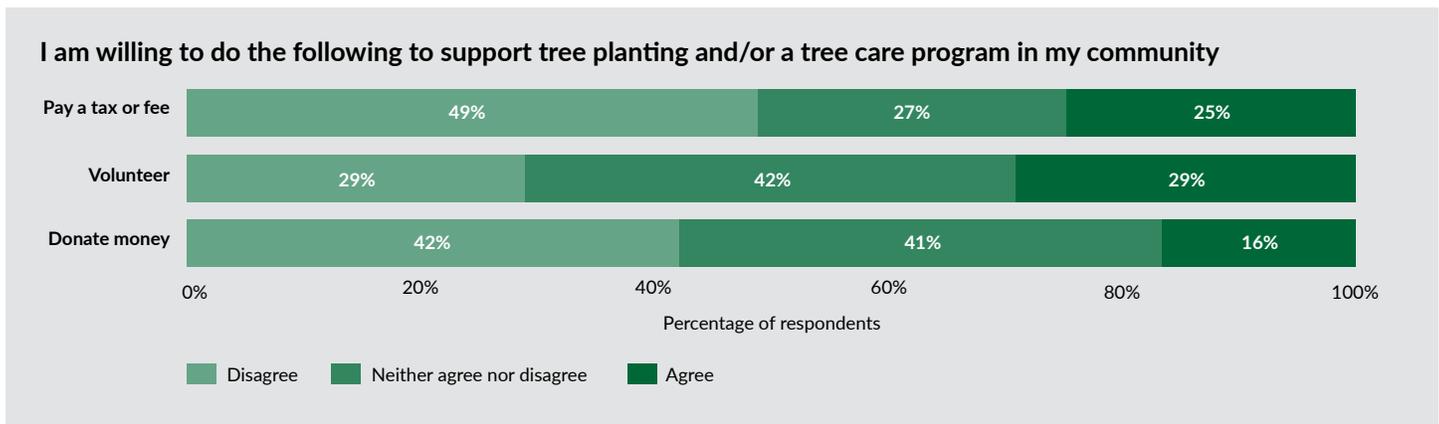


Figure 7. Wausau area respondents' willingness to support urban tree care programs.

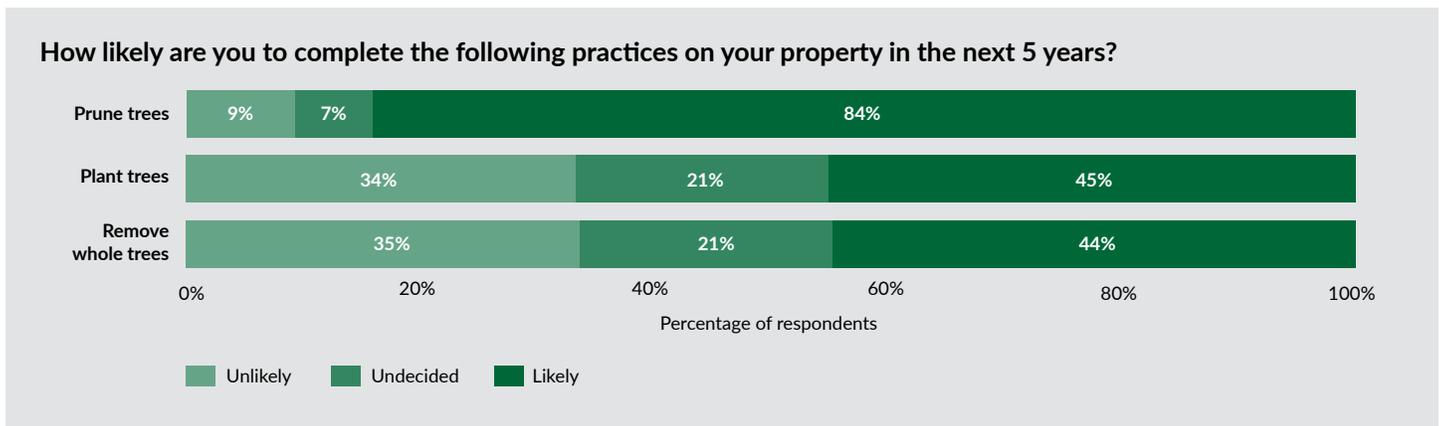


Figure 8. Wausau area respondents' likelihood to complete a practice on their properties.

HOW LIKELY ARE HOMEOWNERS TO PLANT AND CARE FOR THEIR TREES IN THE FUTURE?

Similar to respondents in other urban areas, the vast majority of Wausau area respondents say they carry out tree and yard work themselves (85%). A minority of Wausau area respondents report hiring tree care companies (25%) and landscaping companies (15%) to carry out this work.

Most respondents say they are “extremely likely” or “likely” to prune trees in the next 5 years, while only 45% say they are likely to plant trees (Figure 8). Suburban homeowners are more likely to report the intention to plant trees than city homeowners.

Insight: Messaging to homeowners about behaviors they are already more open to, such as pruning trees, may provide an opportunity to build trust and open dialogue to talk about more challenging practices, such as planting trees or spending money to remove a dead or dying tree.

TO LEARN MORE

Read the full report on the Wisconsin Urban Landowner Survey: www.forestryinsights.org/urban-forestry

Connect with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Urban Forestry Program: www.dnr.wi.gov/topic/UrbanForests/contact.html

Explore landowner outreach strategies with Forestry Insights: www.forestryinsights.org

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