

Two Ways Cities Can Reduce Summer Heat

By Ian Smith and Lucy Hutyra

When summer turns up the heat, cities can start to feel like an oven, as buildings and pavement trap the sun's warmth and vehicles and air conditioners release more heat into the air.

The temperature in an urban neighborhood with few trees can be more than 10 degrees Fahrenheit (5.5 Celsius) higher than in nearby suburbs. That means air conditioning works harder, straining the electrical grid and leaving communities vulnerable to power outages.

There are some proven steps that cities can take to help cool the air—planting trees that provide shade and moisture, for example, or creating cool roofs that reflect solar energy away from the neighborhood rather than absorbing it.

But do these steps pay off everywhere? Which is best, urban trees or cool roofs?

We study heat risk in cities as urban ecologists and have been exploring the impact of tree-planting and reflective roofs in different cities and different neighborhoods across cities. What we're learning

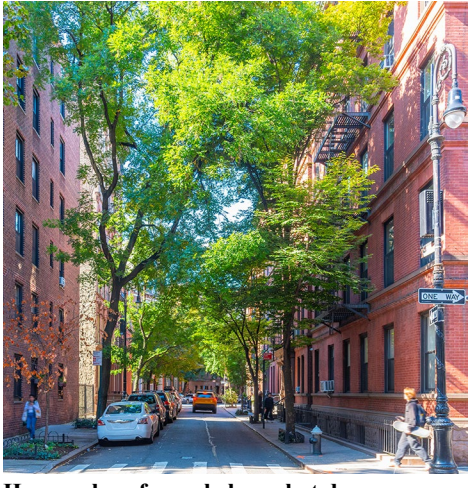
can help cities and homeowners be more targeted in their efforts to beat the heat.

The wonder of trees

Urban trees offer a natural defense against rising temperatures. They cast shade and release water vapor through their leaves, a process akin to human sweating. That cools the surrounding air and reduces afternoon heat. Adding trees to city streets, parks, and residential yards can make a meaningful difference in how hot a neighborhood feels, with blocks that have tree canopies nearly 3 F (1.7 C) cooler than blocks without trees.

But planting trees isn't always simple. In hot, dry cities, trees often require irrigation to survive, which can strain already limited water resources. Trees must survive for decades to grow large enough to provide shade and release enough water vapor to reduce air temperatures. Annual maintenance costs—about \$900 per tree per year in Boston—can surpass the initial planting investment.

Most challenging, dense urban neighborhoods where heat is most intense are often too packed with buildings and roads to grow more trees.



How cool roofs can help on hot days

Another option is "cool roofs." Coating rooftops with reflective paint or using light-colored materials allows buildings to reflect more sunlight back into the atmosphere rather than absorbing it as heat.

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Contact: Brian Hopkins, 401-528-4575, brian.hopkins@sba.gov

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Tuesday, July 21, 2026, 1:00 pm–3:00 pm CDT Online

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Contact: Patrice Dozier, patrice.dozier@sba.gov

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Tuesday, August 11, 2026, 11:00 am–12:30 pm CDT Online

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Contact: Irene Gonzalez, 208-334-1673, irene.gonzalez@sba.gov

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