ALABAMA FORESTRY FOUNDATION

Education Initiative

NEWSLETTER

Ashley Smith Recognized with PLT's Highest Honor

Ashley Smith, Director of Engagement for the Alabama Forestry Foundation and former Project Learning Tree (PLT) Coordinator for Alabama, has been awarded the prestigious Gold Star Award from Project Learning Tree—one of the organization's highest honors recognizing exceptional leadership and impact in environmental education.

The Gold Star Award is presented annually to a select group of national PLT partners and coordinators who go above and beyond to advance PLT's mission. These individuals play a vital role in connecting educators, natural resource professionals, and communities with meaningful, hands-on learning experiences that use forests and trees as windows into the natural world. Their work helps inspire learners of all ages to engage with the outdoors while building a deeper understanding of forest literacy, sustainability, and career pathways.

Smith served as Alabama's PLT Coordinator for eight years, where she consistently worked to expand the program's reach and impact across the state. Her passion for forestry education began as a student at Auburn University, where she first participated in a PLT training in 1993 and quickly recognized its value. After spending several years as a forester in the private sector, she brought that real-world experience to the Alabama Forestry Association, where she transformed environmental education efforts while also earning her master's degree in Conservation Education. During her time there, she also served as the state's Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI-SIC) Coordinator.



"I am honored to be recognized by Project Learning Tree with the Gold Star Award," said Smith. "From my early PLT training as a forestry student to serving as a PLT facilitator and Alabama's PLT coordinator, PLT has been central to how I share forestry's sustainability story. I am grateful for the PLT network and this special recognition. I encourage Alabama's forestry community to explore upcoming Project Learning Tree trainings offered by the Alabama Forestry Foundation."

Known for her precision, leadership, and positive spirit, Smith continues to inspire those around her. The Alabama Forestry Foundation is proud to celebrate this well-deserved recognition and her lasting contributions to forestry education.

"*In the end, we will conserve only what we love; we will love only what we understand and we will understand only what we are taught.*" - Bama Dioum, Senegalese Forester

SPRING 2026

Upcoming Events

Deepen Your Roots: PLT Teacher Workshop
Where: Anniston, AL
Date: April 2, 2026
REGISTER HERE!

PLT Facilitator Training
Where: Huntsville, AL
Date: April 25, 2026
REGISTER HERE!

Project Learning Tree Teacher Workshop
Where: Phenix City, AL
Date: April 30, 2026
REGISTER HERE!

Teacher's Conservation Workshop
Where: Auburn, AL
Date: July 14-16, 2026
REGISTER HERE!

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Spring 2026 Issue

Join the AFF Education Network!

Connect statewide with other teachers, nonformal educators, volunteers, environmental professionals, and more in Alabama's conservation education network!

Click For More Information

Schoolyard Forest Program Update

As of March 2026, 20 schools have registered in the program and 9 schools have been planted!



The Schoolyard Forest Program is dedicated to connecting students to nature. By planting forests at 40 schools across Alabama, kids and young adults increase their time outdoors, learn about trees and plants native to Alabama, and receive all the benefits that nature provides. Contact us for more information.



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Expanding Reach: How Facilitator Trainings Are Growing Alabama's PLT Network

The Alabama Forestry Foundation (AFF) is excited to be revitalizing its Project Learning Tree (PLT) facilitator network through a renewed focus on facilitator trainings—creating fresh opportunities to grow forest literacy across Alabama. PLT facilitators are a passionate volunteer network dedicated to promoting awareness of the environmental and economic benefits of forests, encouraging hands-on learning that sparks curiosity about the natural world, improving student science proficiency through standards-aligned practices, and delivering high-quality education programs statewide.

Facilitators serve as ambassadors for PLT, helping train both formal and nonformal educators to confidently bring forestry and environmental education to life for youth and communities. To become a facilitator, individuals must have participated in a PLT event within the past five years, ensuring they are grounded in the program's engaging, activity-based approach.

In January, AFF proudly hosted its first facilitator training in several years at Kreher Preserve in Auburn, Alabama—and the response was incredible, with all slots filled. Participants spent the day connecting with fellow educators, learning more about AFF's mission and the national PLT network, and diving into AMSTI standards with Dr. Charles Holloway. Through small group breakout sessions, attendees collaborated with peers who teach similar age groups and had the opportunity to lead PLT activities in a supportive, hands-on environment.



The training welcomed a diverse group, from public school teachers to foresters to natural history museum staff, reflecting the broad reach of PLT. Each participant left as a certified facilitator, equipped with PLT guides for preschool, K–8, and high school audiences, as well as fresh ideas and inspiration. The beautiful outdoor learning spaces at Kreher Preserve also offered a powerful example of how engaging outdoor education can be.

Building a strong facilitator network is key to making forest literacy accessible to all Alabamians. By empowering educators across the state, AFF is helping ensure that more students and communities can explore, understand, and appreciate the vital role forests play in our lives.

If you were unable to attend, don't worry—there are more opportunities ahead in 2026! Join us on April 25 at Huntsville Botanical Garden (see the newsletter's upcoming events to register), or mark your calendar for November 5 at the Solon Dixon Center in Andalusia.

For more information on how to become a facilitator, reach out to PLT Coordinator, Jaquie Kelly. Her information can be found to the left.

