An arboretum is a place where different kinds of trees and shrubs are grown for exhibition. The Morton Arboretum from Lisle, Illinois, is collaborating with the Chicago Park District to develop arborets in select parks.

Washington Park has ancient bur oaks, most of which were planted in the early 1870s following a design by Frederick Law Olmsted. The site also features large lindens, hickories and sycamores. At one time, the park provided a tree nursery for the entire South Park District. The resulting large collection of trees in the area motivated the decision to deem this portion of Washington Park an arboretum.

Though the emphasis is on trees, an arboretum also presents opportunities for the introduction of native shrubs and other types of landscaping that are in keeping with the role of an educational tree collection.