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HOW TO BUILD A RAIN GARDEN

By Kathy LaLiberte

There's a new sort of garden in town. It's easy to install, looks good year-round, requires almost no maintenance and has a positive impact on the environment. No wonder rain gardens are such a hot gardening trend!

A rain garden is a special type of garden, designed to collect storm water runoff from a roof, driveway or other impervious surfaces. Rather than rushing off into a storm sewer or a local waterway, the rainwater collects in a garden where it is naturally filtered by plants and soil. Installing a rain garden is easy. You simply dig a shallow depression in your yard and plant it with native grasses and wildflowers.

Rain gardens can have a significant impact on the water quality in our communities. Studies have shown that as much as 70% of the pollution in streams, rivers and lakes has been carried there by storm water. By taking responsibility for the rainwater that falls on your own roof and driveway, you'll be helping to protect our rivers, streams and lakes from storm water pollution. Adding a rain garden to your yard will also provide food and shelter for wildlife, and give you a whole new garden that's hardy, low maintenance and naturally beautiful!

How to Make a Rain Garden

Your rain garden should be located at least 10 feet from the house. A natural site is a low spot in your yard that often collects water after a heavy rain. Ideally this area receives full sun, but at a minimum it should receive a half day of sunlight. There should be a natural slope (at least 1% grade) leading from the water collection area (your roof or driveway) down to the rain garden. Choosing a relatively level spot for the garden will keep digging to a minimum.

Once you've identified the new garden's location, remove the sod and dig a shallow depression approximately 6" deep. Slope the sides gradually from the outside edge to the deepest area. Use the soil that you remove to build up a slightly raised area on the lowest side of the garden. This berm will help contain the storm water and allow it to percolate slowly through the rain garden.

If your rain garden is no more than about 6" deep, storm water will usually be absorbed within a 1-7 day period. Because mosquitoes require 7-10 days to lay and hatch their eggs, this will help you avoid mosquito problems. If you want to create an area with standing water for fish and amphibians, you can make one part of your rain garden deeper, perhaps as much as 18 inches in the deepest spot. Depending on the type of soil you have (sand, clay, loam) you may need to line that area of the garden with plastic to

help retain a small pool of water.

A typical residential rain garden is 100-300 square feet, but any size rain garden is fine. Most people just size the garden to suit their available space. You can calculate the ideal size for a rain garden, based on the surface area of your roof, soil type and the garden's distance from your house. (For more detail, see the links at the end of this article.)

Your downspout or sump pump outlet should be directed toward your rain garden depression. This can be accomplished by a natural slope, by digging a shallow swale, or by piping the runoff directly to the garden through a buried 4" diameter plastic drain tile.

Time to plant! Native plants are the best choice for rain gardens. They withstand difficult growing conditions and require little care. When choosing the plants, consider height, bloom time and color. Clumps of 3-7 plants of the same variety will look better than a patchwork of singles. Be sure to mix native ornamental grasses and sedges with your perennial wildflowers to ensure the garden has a strong root mass that will resist erosion and inhibit weed growth.

New plants should be watered every other day for the first two weeks or so. Once they are well established your garden should thrive without additional watering. Fertilizers will not be necessary, and only minimal weeding will be needed after the first summer of growth.

Most rain gardeners wait until early spring to cut back the prior year's growth. Leaving seed heads and spent foliage in place through the winter provides visual interest as well as cover and food for many kinds of wildlife. Once spring comes, burning off the dead material is the best way to knock back weeds and stimulate new growth. If burning is not an option, mow the dead plants or cut them back with a scythe or pruning shears.

[Applied Ecological Services, Inc.](#) has been installing rain gardens for almost 20 years. Their web site has lots of good information about rain gardens, and their Taylor Creek Restoration Nursery offers a wide variety of garden plants. The University of Wisconsin-Extension has produced a detailed, 32 page manual about rain gardens. It's available online: [Rain Gardens: A How-To Manual for Homeowners.](#)



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RAIN GARDEN PLANTS

Native plants-full to part shade with clay soils

Sweet flag
Tall Bellflower
Marsh Marigold
Wild Blue flag iris
Cardinal Flower
Virginia Bluebells
Purple joe pyeweed
Gayfeather

Full to partial shade with sandy soils

Side flower Aster
Tall Bellflower
Cardinal flower
Virginia Bluebells
Interrupted Fern
Woodland phlox

Full to part Sun with clay soil

Sweet flag
Swamp milkweed
Cardinal flower
Switch grass
Penstemon digitalis
Rudbeckia subtomentosa
Penstemmon digitalis

Full to part sun with sandy soil

New England Aster
Spotted Joe pye weed
Gayfeather
Cardinal flower
Switch grass
Wild Bergamot