Rain Gardens

What is a rain garden?

A rain garden is a shallow depression in the landscape planted with plants that are both drought and moisture tolerant, including wildflowers, grasses and shrubs. Native plants are important to include because they are adapted to the local ecosystem and tend to have deeper roots. Rain gardens are designed to be the receptors of the rain from impervious surfaces, such as: rooftops, driveways, sidewalks, patios and roads. They are designed to be aesthetically appealing, while minimizing a significant environmental problem—water run off.

Rain Garden Functions

The primary function of a rain garden is to intercept, trap and treat rainwater before it can run off—we want it to infiltrate the ground. Runoff may include pollutants from lawns and impervious surfaces including leaves, de-icing salts, lawn fertilizers and herbicides, automotive fluids and more. Rain gardens can reduce the load of nutrients (phosphorus and nitrogen) entering our surface waters.

Sample Plant List

Wet zone:

Wild bergamot	Giant Hyssop
Marsh milkweed	Cardinal Flower
Turtle Head	Sneezeweed
Marsh Marigold	Great blue lobelia
Ferns	Red-osier dogwood
American Cranberry	

Upland Zone:

Blue vervain	Black-eyed Susan
Monarda (Bee Balm)	Coneflowers
Grass leaf goldenrod	Golden Alexander
Joe pye weed	Astilbe
Bottlebrush sedge	Little bluestem grass

Where should I locate my rain garden?

Position a rain garden where it can intercept the most runoff from hard surfaces. Notice the location of your down spouts, where water runs off the driveway and the topography of the landscape. Is there a spot in your yard where you can maximize rain collection? To prevent damage to house foundations, it is recommended that it be located at least 10 feet away.

Ask your local zoning office about set-backs.

Photo credit: Valerie Prax

Sources and for more information:

University of Wisconsin Extension Service and DNR: http://www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/water/wm/nps/rg/links.htm

MPCA Plants for Stormwater Design: http://www.pca.state.mn.us

Design Guidelines for Stormwater Bioretention Facilities http://www.aqua.wisc.edu/publications/

The Bioretention Manual http://www.goprincegeorgescounty.com/government/agencyindex/der/bioreten

Minnesota Urban Small Sites BMP Manual http://www.metrocouncil.org/environment/Watershed/bmp/manual.htm

Duluth Streams Organization http://www.duluthstreams.org/citizen/wet_garden.html

Metropolitan Council Rain Garden http://www.metrocouncil.org/directions/water/water2006/raingardensApr06.htm

Back to Table of Contents

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