Rain Gardens

Designing and planting your backyard rain garden

Rain gardens are beautiful landscaping features that manage stormwater on site. Their loose, deep soils absorb water and filter pollutants. Some rain gardens have under-drains that carry filtered water away.

Rain gardens complement any style of landscape. Their size can vary, and they can fit into odd shapes and spaces. They are an excellent method of keeping stormwater on site, and protecting streams and rivers.

Why do you need a rain garden?

When rain and snowmelt run off our yards, roofs, sidewalks, roads, and parking lots, the resulting stormwater runoff washes pollution into our streams and rivers. Stormwater, by rushing in all at once, also causes erosion and flooding.

Rain gardens can help prevent stormwater runoff. These beautiful gardens are designed to collect and soak up stormwater and replenish groundwater. Groundwater recharges streams and rivers gently and naturally.

By planting a rain garden, you can help solve some of our stormwater problems. The deep, loose soil in your rain garden will soak up water that would otherwise leave your property. Rain gardens come in all shapes and sizes, can be designed for any site, are easy to install and maintain, will beautify your landscape, and attract birds and butterflies.

You can easily create a simple rain garden in a weekend, for little cost if you use plants you already have. Or, you can install a deluxe rain garden that will take more effort and investment. It's all up to you!

Where should you put your rain garden?

You can locate a rain garden almost anywhere, but consider these things about placement.

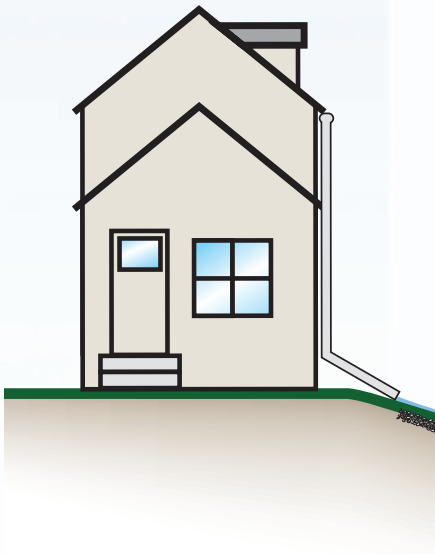
Be sure your rain garden is downhill and at least ten feet from building foundations. Place your rain garden away from underground utilities or easements. You want water in gardens, not basements, and you do not want to accidentally dig up a gas line. It is a good idea to have utilities flagged before starting to dig.

The easiest place to put a rain garden is where water is already going, in a low spot where water naturally collects. If you aren't sure of where that is, run a hose on the lawn and watch where water flows. If this is an attractive place for a garden, you can design it there. You can also direct water to that spot through an underground tile, construct a dry streambed lined with gravel, or use some other creative method.

The best place to put your rain garden is where you will get a good view of it. The most practical place is to design it into your existing landscaping. On a slope, it can be behind or in front of a retaining wall, or simply in a scallop cut into the slope. The surface of the rain garden should be fairly level, to hold water. You can also create a berm around the rain garden to hold water in.

How big and what shape should you make your rain garden?

Any size or shape rain garden is perfect. Every rain garden, no matter what size, makes a difference. Just make one!



How do you create the rain garden bed?

Soil preparation leads to wonderful success!

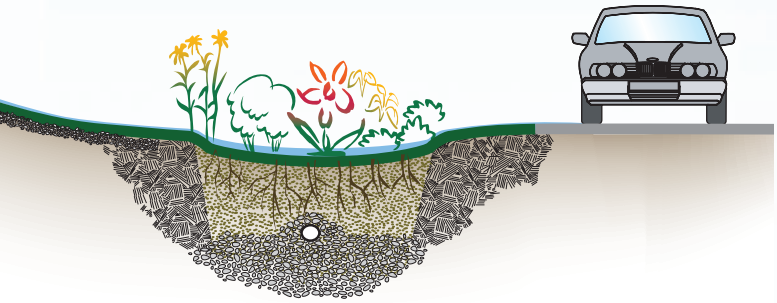
Soil around your home is compacted during construction, reducing its ability to absorb water. Your rain garden restores this natural function.

Your rain garden will need deep, absorbent soil to soak up water. The easiest way to accomplish this is to remove the existing soil and replace it with a light, loose mixture. One recommended mix is 50-60% sand, 20-30% compost and 20-30% topsoil. To make sure water gathers in your garden, make the garden saucer or dish-shaped instead of mounded, with a dip about six to eight inches deep. The sponge-like soil will do the rest.

Rain garden soil preparation can be from one foot to as much as eight feet deep! The deeper your soil preparation, the more water your rain garden will be able to absorb. You can increase capacity by placing a gravel reservoir in the bottom of your garden, then placing your soil on top.

The characteristics of local soils also affect your rain garden. If the surrounding soils do not absorb much water, make sure your rain garden can soak up the volume of water you plan to send there. You don't want to create a pond or a mudpie! The water collected should be able to soak into the garden within a few hours.

Remember, the surface of the rain garden needs to be level or slightly dipped, so water will not run out and will spread evenly as it soaks into the soil. You can use a string level to help you create this feature.



What kinds of plants are good for rain gardens?

Rain gardens feature easy-care perennial plants that do well in a wide range of growing conditions.

Native species are highly recommended for rain gardens, and provide wildlife habitat as well as natural beauty. Wildflowers, ferns, grasses, and even shrubs and trees are used in rain gardens.

Find a local nursery, botanical garden, or other horticultural group that can advise you on the right plants for your particular site and climate. Do not choose aggressive species of plants that you will need to divide frequently.

You can design your own rain garden, use an existing plan, or hire a professional to create your rain garden layout. Seeded or naturalistic rain gardens are economical and function well, but some people find them inappropriate in formal settings.

Maintaining your Beautiful Rain Garden

Care for your rain garden regularly. Simple maintenance is required to keep your rain garden looking beautiful and functioning well.

Water: Water daily the first few weeks after planting, then regularly until plants are established. Later on, water in a drought if this is practical.

Weed: Weed on a regular basis, especially the first year. If you label your plants, this helps you tell the weeds from the flowers.

Mulch: A two to three inch layer of shredded hardwood mulch reduces weeding and watering and helps establish the plants. It also prevents surface sealing of the rain garden, and removes specific pollutants from pavement runoff. Avoid using bark chips, which float.

Fertilize: Should not be necessary. Native plants should thrive in the prepared soil mix. Avoid use of herbicides, pesticides, and fungicides in and around the rain garden. Compost makes a good soil amendment for rain gardens.

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Information about native plants and rain gardens at **raingardens.org.**

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Raingardens.org is a program of West Michigan Environmental Action Council
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