Capturing Rain in Your Garden

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Filtering rainwater benefits the landscape

Where does rain water from your roof go? If you have gutters, they capture rain water. The captured water flows into a downspout and either disperses into the ground or is carried via pipes to a storm drain.

Without gutters, rain comes off your roof in sheets of water and falls close to the house foundation where it might leak into your foundation or basement.

Building a rain garden lets you control where the water from your roof is collected without that place being your basement or city storm drains.

A rain garden captures rain water, filters it and then disperse it slowly; it is not a pond where water is always present above ground. A well-designed rain garden can put an end to standing water problems or basement water.

A rain garden benefits your landscape in several ways. These include:

- Gives habitat to beneficial insects and birds
- Filters out contaminates (oil, pesticides and fertilizers) before they reach ground water
- Reduces flooding
- Increases local ground water
- Beautifies your yard

Steps to Creating a Rain Garden

Creating a rain garden requires four steps: planning, building, planting and maintaining. First, find out your city or county requirements about building or siting rain gardens.

Once you know the legal requirements, decide where to site the rain garden and determine how much water you expect it to collect, so you know how large the catchment basin needs to be. Whether all gutters feed the rain garden or some feed rain barrels is up to you.

A rain garden is typically sited downhill from the building whose roof is the source of the rain water. You can divert roof water directly to a collection basin by piping downspouts to disperse water into the basin, or you can let gravity carry the water to the collection basin.

Installing a Rain Garden

Once you know where the rain garden will be, how large it will be, and how it will collect water, it’s time to build it. Dry, summer weather is a good time to construct a rain garden, since rainfall is unlikely to slow your progress.

A WSU Skagit County master gardener monitors the David Brookings Rain Garden in 2014, noting any problem areas. *Photo by Jane Billinghurst / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

If you are piping roof water to the garden, this can involve extensive digging to lay pipe from the gutters to the outflow. You may need to remove lawn or plantings where you want to dig the catch basin. Be sure your schedule allows for unforeseen problems, such as running into old piping, tree roots, and such.

If your rain garden is small, close to the downspouts, and you have experience with a shovel, you can likely build the rain garden yourself. For large gardens or inexperienced homeowners, check the Web for landscapers who specialize in rain garden construction.

Planting a Rain Garden

What you plant in your rain garden is determined by the rain garden's function: capturing and filtering rain water that has picked up pollutants. For that reason, do not choose edible plants for your rain garden.

Many of the best rain garden plants are native plants. Natives are ready to survive wet winters, cool springs, dry summers and crisp falls. They have also evolved to survive local pests. Rain garden plants should not be treated with chemical fertilizers, herbicides or pesticides.

Check the resources listed below for planting suggestions. Anything you plant must be able to tolerate wet feet for short periods of time without dying as well as lengthy dry spells.

Select plants that will not crowd out the other plants in the rain garden or provide too much shade to the plants beneath them. Install plants that attract birds, bees, butterflies and other animal life that enhance plant health and give life to your rain garden.

An interpretive sign in the David Brookings Rain Garden on Coninental Place in Mount Vernon, installed in 2015 by WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners, informs visitors about beneficial aspects of the garden. *Photo by Jane Billinghurst / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

Maintaining a Rain Garden

Like any garden bed, a rain garden needs maintenance. Mulch is essential to keep the underlying soil and plant roots cool and to retain water in the top soil.

For the first two or three years, you may need to water during dry spells until the plants mature the long root systems they need to survive on their own. If drought conditions exist, you will need to extend the period you water your plants.

Weeds are still weeds–even in a rain garden--so you need to get rid of them regularly. Since last year's mulch decomposes into the top soil, you will need to add more every spring, keeping it away from the plants themselves.

Learn More about Rain Gardens

To see a working rain garden, drop by the Skagit County Public Works building at 1800 Continental Place in Mount Vernon. Skagit master gardeners helped design the garden and provide regular help to maintain it.

There are several good resources to learn more about building rain gardens. Look for *Rain Garden Handbook for Western Washington*, published by the Washington State Department of Ecology, WSU Extension, and Kitsap County.

WSU Extension has a rain gardens website at http://raingarden.wsu.edu/ that includes list of professional and volunteer resources. *Creating Rain Gardens: Capturing Rain for Your Own Water-Efficient Garden* from Timber Press, gives in-depth, step-by-step guidance to designing and building a rain garden.

Also from Timber is *Rain Gardens: Managing Water Sustainably in the Garden and Designed Landscape.*

RESOURCES:

- *Rain Garden Handbook for Western Washington*. Washington State Department of Ecology, WSU Extension, and Kitsap County.
- "Rain Gardens." WSU Extension. http://raingarden.wsu.edu/
- Uncapher, April and Weolfte-Erskine, Cleo. *Creating Rain Gardens: Capturing Rain for Your Own Water-Efficient Garden.* April 17, 2012. Timber Press.
- Claydon, Andy and Dunnelt, Nigel. *Rain Gardens: Managing Water Sustainably in the Garden and Designed Landscape.* April 1, 2007. Timber Press.