

Ask a Master Gardener

Timely insights on relevant topics from our area's home gardening experts

Dealing with Wet Spots in the Yard and Garden

Do you ever look at the bog in your yard and wonder,
"What can I do with THAT area?"

By Carla Glassman, Skagit County WSU Extension Master Gardener

When dealing with soggy areas in your landscape, it's essential to understand the underlying causes of the wetness and how to manage them effectively. Identifying the root issue is the first step toward improvement. Determine if the wet area is due to natural water saturation, faulty drainage, or runoff from impervious surfaces.

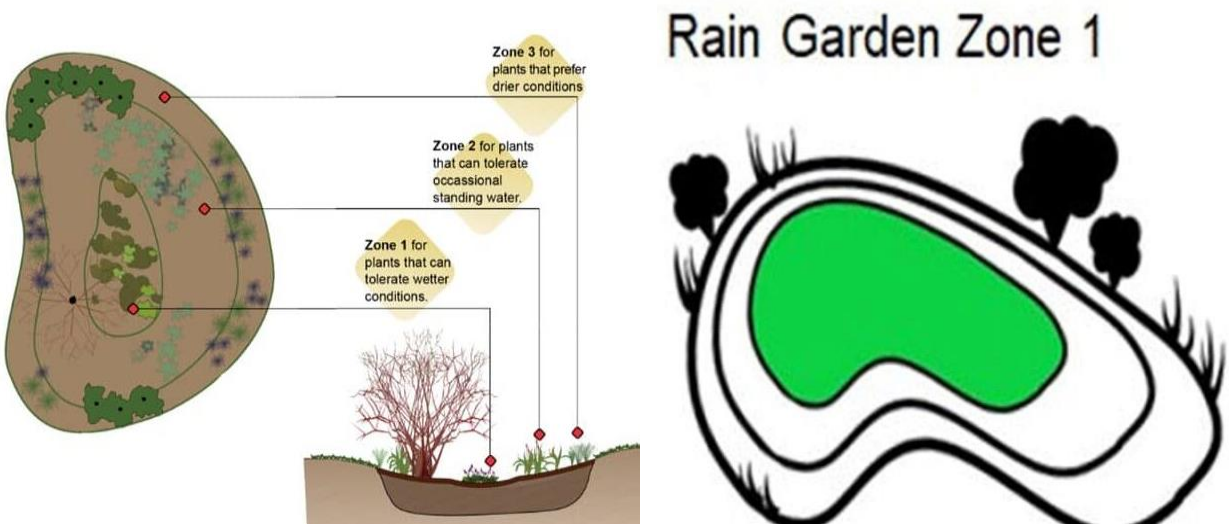
Some areas are just naturally wet, but to be sure, it is essential to rule out other problems like a broken sewer or water pipe. With underground issues ruled out, the next step is determining if the excess water is caused by impervious surface runoff (i.e., rooftops, sidewalks, or driveways.) If so, redirect the water to an area with better drainage.

If none of these issues are the problem, you may wonder, "Is it possible to fix it?" Often, the answer is yes. The solutions range from re-grading your yard and installing drains to working with the wet area and installing plants which grow well in wet conditions.

Some consider aggressive solutions such as adjusting the flow of the land. Doing so likely will require effort, equipment, time, and money. And possibly applying for a permit. Before moving any soil, check out the county's Land Disturbing Activity Guide, and if necessary, call to determine if a permit is required. In Skagit County, you may need a permit for projects that:

- Exceed 100 cubic yards
- Modify drainage patterns in any way
- Has a depth or height of 3 feet or greater

You may try to "fix" the wet area by working with what you have, using less expensive or less extensive options. Soggy areas can be improved somewhat by aeration or adding compost or mulch. These improve soil structure in poorly drained soils by increasing soil aggregation. While mulch, compost, and aeration can improve overall soil health and drainage, they will not change the character of the underlying soil or the position on the landscape nor repair severely compacted or altered soil.



Left: When finished, landscaping in wet areas may look much like a rain garden planting; the difference is in the underlying soil type. **Right:** Typically, an area will have wetter areas, just like the zones in a rain garden. Select plants for the wet area as you would select plants for a rain garden based on the plant's specific needs for soil type, sunlight or shade, moisture, etc.

Fortunately, there is another option. There are a lot of beautiful plants that do very well in wet soils. Using the principle of "Right Plant, Right Place" or in this case "right purpose" you can install suitable plants in the area that will naturally slow runoff and allow the water to spread out.This will increase the permeability of the soil and also reduce the maintenance needs of the wet area.

Working in wet areas requires care to protect the soil. Cover bare soil with woody mulch; avoid walking or working on it when saturated. Choose plants that thrive in wet places. Landscaping in wet areas may look much like a rain garden planting when finished, because many of the same plants will likely be happy in both places. However, installing a landscape in a wet area is different from installing a rain garden in your yard. Rain gardens are created on well-draining soils that can handle a lot of run-off directed into them. Unlike a rain garden, naturally wet areas do not have well-draining soils. They should not have additional runoff directed to

them because this would cause further problems. If soil compaction or heavy soil type is part of the drainage problem, installing plants with good root structures will improve the soil structure by growing roots deeper and making pathways for the water to follow. Over time, this allows material from plants, insects, and microbes to increase the soil's humus improving its ability to absorb water.





Consider Using Native Plants: Native plants are well adapted to our environment. They don't require extra care, water, or fertilizer. More than that, wildlife depends on them and won't survive without them. Red twig dogwood and Pacific sword fern are native and do well in moist environments.

Whether you use native plants, non-natives, or a mix, include plants of varying heights and root zones. Using varying heights and textural layers (different leaf types) is healthy for plants and wildlife and a beautiful technique. Mix various colors and textures for visual interest with a common thread that ties everything together through a consistent style.

Choosing Form and Function

Now, select plants keeping in mind the place they will be. For best results, know what your area is like during all the seasons of the year. Is your soggy spot in the sun or shade or something in between? Is it always soggy, somewhat soggy-to-damp, or does it dry out in the summer? Typically, an area will have some wetter areas, just like the zones in a rain garden.

Consider nearby physical restrictions like powerlines, underground pipes, or easements. A little planning at the beginning can save a lot of repair work in the future.

Select plants for the wet area as you would select plants for a rain garden based on the plant's specific needs for soil type, sunlight or shade, moisture, etc. Selecting the "right plant" based on the plants needs saves time, money, and effort reducing fussing, tending, and possibly replacing later.

Zone 1 in a rain garden is the wettest area. Zone 1 plants must be able to tolerate periods of inundation (standing water.) Most rain gardens are not continually wet in Zone 1 because they are supposed to drain. They may even be totally dry for part of the summer.

Zone 2 in a rain garden is the next wettest area of a rain garden. Plants for Zone 2 are seldom inundated with water but usually damp.

Zone 3 of a rain garden is generally dry. Zone 3 plants would do well in the area whether or not there was a rain garden and may even need to be drought-tolerant. When selecting plants, choose plants that will be able to tolerate the amount of water inundation in your area. Zone 1 plants can tolerate wet conditions and seasonal flooding, so they are a good choice for your wet spot. From that group, choose plants that have the "right" light needs for your space.

Select plants depending on the degree of water inundation in your "wet" area. If your location is generally moist with seasonal wet, you might choose plants listed in the chart below suited to "Rain Garden Zone 2." Many plants are less fussy and are able to do well in more than one zone. You may want to "hedge your bet" by selecting a variety of plants, increasing the odds of success.

Accept the challenge of wet spots in your garden as an opportunity to create a thriving ecosystem! By selecting plants that naturally filter water and develop robust root systems, you can improve the underlying soil structure while enhancing the beauty of your landscape. These resilient plants will not only thrive in the moisture but will also work to improve drainage over time, turning a soggy area into an area you can enjoy. Make the most of your garden' unique characteristics and watch it flourish!

The following list is a compilation based on information from The Washington Native Plant Society, Great Plant Picks, Missouri Botanical Garden, Native Plants PNW, USDA Plant Database, oregonflora.org, and kingcounty.gov/goNative.

* = non-native D = Deciduous E = Evergreen SE = Semi-evergreen

1@ = Tolerates seasonal flooding 2@ = Tolerates moderately wet sites
3@ = Tolerates seasonal dry

Plant Type	Rain Garden Zone			Foliage	Light	Moisture	Max Height	*Plant Name*	Common Name
Fern	1	2		D	part-full shade	moist-wet	3 ft	*Athyrium filix-femina*	Common Lady Fern
Fern		2		E	part-full shade	moist-wet	2 ft	*Blechnum spicant*	Deer Fern
*Fern	1	2		D	part-full shade	moist-wet	6 ft	*Matteuccia struthiopteris*	ostrich fern
*Fern	1	2		D	part-full shade	moist-wet	5 ft	*Osmunda regalis*	Royal Fern
Fern		2	3	E	part-full shade	moist	5 ft	*Polystichum munitum*	Western Swordfern
*Grass	1	2		D	sun-shade	Moist-wet	2.5 ft	*Acorus calamus*	Sweet Flag
*Grass	1	2		SE	full-part sun	moist-wet	1 ft	*Acorus gramineus 'Ogon'*	Variegated Sweet Flag

*Grass	1	2		E	part-full shade	moist-wet	2.5 ft	*Carex elata 'Aurea'*	Bowles' golden sedge
Grass	1	2		E	sun-shade	moist-wet	3 ft	*Carex obnupta*	Slough sedge.
*Grass	1	2		D	sun	moist-wet	3 ft	*Molinia caerulea*	Purple Moor Grass
*Grass	1	2		D	sun	moist-wet	3 ft	*Pennisetum orientale*	Fountain grass
Grass	1	2		D	full-part sun	moist-wet	5 ft	*Scirpus microcarpus*	Small fruited bulrush
Herb	1	2		D	sun	moist	3 ft	*Allium validum*	Tall Swamp Onion
Herb	1@	2	3	D	full-part sun	dry-moist	3 ft	*Aquilegia formosa*	Western Columbine
*Herb	1	2		D	sun	moist-wet	4 ft	*Asclepias incarnata*	Swamp Milkweed
*Herb	1	2		D	full-part shade	moist-wet	3 ft	*Astrantia major*	Greater Masterwort
Herb	1	2		D	full-part sun	wet	2 ft	*Caltha Biflora*	Broad leaved Marsh Marigold
Herb	1	2		D	full-part sun	wet	2 ft	*Caltha leptosepala*	White Marsh Marigold (Elkslip)
Herb	1	2		D	full-part sun	wet	2 ft	*Caltha palustris*	Yellow Marsh-marigold
Herb	1@	2	3@	D	sun	moist	4 ft	*Camassia leichtlinii*	Large Camas
Herb	1@	2	3@	D	sun	moist	3 ft	*Camassia quamash*	Common Camas
Herb	1	2		D	sun-shade	moist-wet	6"	*Cornus canadensis*	Bunchberry Dogwood
*Herb	1	2		D	part-full shade	moist-wet	5 ft	*Darmera peltata*	Umbrella Plant
Herb	1	2		D	part shade	moist-wet	9 ft	*Delphinium glaucum*	Sierra Larkspur
*Herb	1	2		D	part-full shade	moist-wet	.5 ft	*Galium odoratum*	Sweet woodruff
*Herb	1	2		D	Sun	moist-wet	3 ft	*Helenium*	Sneezeweed
*Herb		2@		D	part-full shade	moist	1-3 ft	Hosta	Hosta
Herb	1	2		D	part-full shade	moist-wet	3 ft	*Hydrophyllum tenuipes*	Pacific Waterleaf

*Herb	1	2		D	full-part sun	wet	2 ft	*Iris ensata 'Variegata'*	Variegated Japanese Water Iris
Herb	1	2		D	sun	wet	2 ft	*Iris missouriensis*	Rocky Mountain Iris
*Herb	1	2		D	full-part sun	moist-wet	1.5 ft	Iris	Siberian iris
*Herb	1	2		D	full-part sun	moist-wet	2.5 ft	*Iris versicolor*	Blue Flag Iris
*Herb	1	2		D	part shade	moist-wet	3 ft	*Kerria japonica 'Picta'*	Dwarf Japanese kerria
*Herb	1	2		D	part shade	moist-wet	6 ft	*Kerria japonica 'Simplex'*	Japanese kerria
Herb	1	2		D	shade	moist-wet	1.5 ft	*Maianthemum dilatatum*	False Lily Of The Valley
Herb	1	2		D	part shade	moist-wet	2.5 ft	*Mimulus lewisii*	Purple Monkeyflower
Herb		2	3	D	part-full shade	moist-dry	8"	*Oxalis oregana*	Oregon Wood Sorrel
Herb	1	2	3	SE	part sun	moist - wet	2.5 ft	*Penstemon serrulatus*	Cascade Penstemon
*Herb	1	2		D	Part-full shade	moist-wet	3 ft	*Polygonatum odoratum*	Solomon's seal
*Herb	1	2		SE	part shade	moist-wet	2 ft	*Primula beesiana*	Bee's candelabra primrose
*Herb	1	2		SE	part shade	moist-wet	2 ft	*Primula bulleyana*	Bulley's candelabra primrose
*Herb	1	2		D	part shade	moist-wet	.75 ft	*Primula 'Guinevere'*	Guinevere primrose
*Herb	1	2		SE	part shade	moist-wet	1.5 ft	*Primula japonica*	Candelabra Primula
*Herb	1	2		D	full-part sun	moist-wet	6 ft	*Rodgersia aesculifolia*	finger-leaf rodgersia
Herb	1	2		E	full-part sun	moist-wet	3.5 ft	*Saxifraga oregana*	Oregon Saxifrage
Herb	1	2		SE	full-part sun	moist-wet	2 ft	*Sisyrinchium californicum*	Golden-eyed Grass
Herb	1@	2	3	E	sun-shade	moist	3 ft	*Tellima grandiflora*	Bigflower Tellima, Fragrant Fringecup

Herb	1	2		D	part-full shade	moist-wet	3 ft	*Thalictrum occidentale*	Western Meadow-rue
Herb	1@	2		D	part-full shade	moist-wet	2 ft	*Trillium ovatum*	Pacific Trillium
Herb	1	2		D	part-full shade	moist-wet	1 ft	*Viola glabella*	Pioneer Violet, Smooth Yellow Violet
*Shrub	1@	2	3	D	full-part sun	moist-dry	6 ft	*Aronia melanocarpa*	Black chokeberry
Shrub-tree	1	2		D	sun-shade	moist-wet	6 ft	*Aruncus dioicus*	Goatsbeard
*Shrub-tree	1	2		D	full-part sun	moist-wet	30 ft	*Asimina triloba*	Pawpaw
*Shrub		2@	3	D	part sun	dry-moist	10 ft	*Chaenomeles speciosa*	Flowering Quince
*Shrub-tree	1	2	3@	D	full-part sun	moist-wet	10 ft	*Cornus alba*	Tatarian Dogwood
Shrub-tree	1	2	3	D	full-part sun	moist-wet	12 ft	*Cornus sericea*	Red Osier Dogwood
*Shrub	1@	2@		D	full-part sun	moist-wet	8 ft	*Clethra alnifolia*	Sweet Pepperbush
Shrub-tree	1	2	3	D	full-part sun	moist-wet	30 ft	*Crataegus douglasii*	Black Hawthorn
Shrub-tree	1@	2	3	E	sun-shade	dry-moist	6 ft	*Gaultheria shallon*	Salal
*Shrub	1	2		D	Part shade	moist-wet	5 ft	*Hydrangea arborescens*	Smooth Hydrangea
*Shrub-tree					sun	moist-wet	40 ft	*Liriodendron tulipifera*	Tulip Tree
Shrub-vine	1	2		D	sun - shade	moist-wet	10 ft	*Lonicera involucrata*	Twinberry
Tree	1	2		E	part sun	moist-wet	35 ft	*Magnolia virginiana*	Sweet Bay Magnolia
Shrub-tree		2	3	E	part-full shade	dry-moist	2 ft	*Mahonia nervosa*	Low Oregon grape
Shrub-tree	1	2	3	D	full-part shade	moist	30 ft	*Malus fusca*	Pacific Crabapple
Shrub-tree	1			D	sun-shade	wet	4 ft	*Myrica gale*	Sweet Gale
shrub-tree	1	2	3	D	full-part sun	moist-dry	8 ft	*Physocarpus capitatus*	Pacific ninebark

Shrub-tree		2@	3	E	part-full shade	dry-moist	25 ft	*Rhododendron macrophyllum*	Pacific Rhododendron
Shrub-tree		2@		D	part shade	moist	15 ft	*Rhododendron occidentale*	Western Azalea
Shrub-tree		2		D	full-part sun	moist	10 ft	*Ribes divaricatum*	Coast Black Gooseberry
Shrub-tree		2	3	D	full-part sun	moist-dry	10 ft	*Ribes sanguineum*	Red flowering currant
Shrub-tree	1@	2	3	D	sun-shade	moist-dry	10 ft	*Rubus parviflorus*	Thimbleberry
Shrub-tree	1@	2		D	sun-shade	moist-dry	30 ft	*Salix hookeriana*	Coastal Willow, Dune Willow, Hooker's Willow
*Shrub tree	1@	2	3	D	full-part sun	moist-dry	3 ft	*Salix purpurea 'Nana'*	Dwarf Purple Osier Willow
Shrub-tree	1@	2		D	sun-shade	moist-dry	27 ft	*Salix sitchensis*	Sitka Willow
Shrub-tree	1	2		D	part shade	moist-wet	16 ft	*Viburnum opulus var. americanum*	American Cranberrybush Viburnum
Shrub-vine	1	2		E	full-part sun		1.5 ft	*Vaccinium oxycoccos*	Small Cranberry
Shrub	1	2		D	full-part shade	moist-wet	10 ft	*Vaccinium parvifolium*	Red Huckleberry
Shrub-vine	1	2		D	full-part sun	moist-wet	9 ft	*Vaccinium uliginosum*	Bog Huckleberry

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES:

- King County interactive native plant list which can be sorted by plant type, height, etc. Native Plants. King County: Retrieved at: https://green2.kingcounty.gov/gonative/Plant.aspx?Act=list
- Native landscaping plans: *Landscaping with Native Plants.* King County: Retrieved at: https://green2.kingcounty.gov/gonative/Plan.aspx?Act=list
- Information on Permits. Skagit County, Washington Retrieved at: https://www.skagitcounty.net/Departments/PlanningAndPermit/forms.htm
- *Testing and Improving Soil Drainage.* Iowa State University Extension: https://yardandgarden.extension.iastate.edu/how-to/testing-and-improving-soil-drainage
- *Don't Just Landscape, Rainscape. Create beautiful landscapes that protect water quality and reduce runoff.* Skagit County Retrieved at: skagitcounty.net/PublicWorksSurfaceWaterManagement/Documents/Stormwater/RainScape%20Brochure.pdf

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- *From soggy to sublime: Trees, shrubs and perennials that love soggy sites*. (April 2014) Retrieved at: Oregon Live.com


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Questions about home gardening or becoming a master gardener may be directed to Skagit County WSU Extension Office, 11768 Westar Lane, Suite A, Burlington, WA 98233; by phone: 360-428-4270; or via the website: https://extension.wsu.edu/skagit/mg/

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