

## **SPOTLIGHT ON... RAIN GARDENS**

### **Rain Garden – What Is It, and Why Would We Want One?**

What is a rain garden? Do we need one? What benefit does it provide? These are questions many gardeners are beginning to ask as they hear the words rain garden being bantered around. Erroneously, some people think a rain garden is a spot in the yard that fills with water and becomes a mini pond for portions of the year, especially in the rainy weather from winter through spring and sometimes even into summer.

What rain gardens really are is a constructed shallow area of a garden where rainfall that runs off roofs, driveways, sidewalks and the landscape can linger for a day or two and be filtered and absorbed by soil and plants rather than being channeled away from the land to whoosh and rush out into our streams, lakes and into Puget Sound through stormwater pipes and drainage swales. Plants and materials in a rain garden aid in removal of pollution. Water that stays on the land also recycles into the air replenishing groundwater and water cycles.

The Rain Garden Handbook from Washington State University Pierce County Extension <https://fortress.wa.gov/ecy/publications/publications/1310027.pdf> is a step by step guide for home gardeners and landscapers. The handbook can be downloaded for free from the link.

WSU Extension and Stewardship Partners have a rain garden website for Puget Sound: <http://www.12000raingardens.org/> , where individuals and groups can register rain gardens they've installed on their properties or in their communities. The website includes tips and helpful links and information about rain gardens.

Rain gardens can cost between \$500 and several thousand dollars to construct. However, installation can occur over time, or a person can decide to build several groupings of rain gardens. For example if you have a shed, garage and house, one year you may want to capture the runoff from just the shed. The next year add the garage and finally add the whole house. Every little bit helps. A single downspout may only need a rain garden as big around as your outstretched arms, easily built with a little shovel time, a handful of plants and a cubic yard of soil, sand and compost mix.



*Photo Courtesy Whidbey Island Conservation District*

### **Rain Garden Dos and Don'ts**

There are a few places not to install a rain garden. Avoid septic drain fields and over the septic tank. Keep at least 50 feet between a rain garden and the septic system. Always call before you dig to have the location of all utilities identified: 1-800-424-5555. If your property has healthy native soils and abundant native plants, or you live in a forest or naturally vegetated area, building a rain garden may not be for you. You are actually living in a nature-made rain garden already.

Avoid areas where water regularly puddles longer than 24 hours. Do not construct a rain garden where the groundwater is within 1 foot of the bottom of the finished rain garden. Stay 10 feet away from building foundations. Definitely stay at least 100 feet or more away from steep slopes or bluffs. The added weight,

disturbance and water filtering through these geological features could result in slope or bluff failure and collapse. If you are building near a bluff, please consult a geological engineer or other qualified professional prior to construction, to minimize your chance of slides.

## Anatomy of a Rain Garden

Rain gardens are usually only 12 to 24 inches deep. Planting areas, once soil is added, can sometimes be as shallow as 6 inches deep. Water remains in a rain garden for one to two days at the most (not long enough for mosquitoes to breed). A rain garden includes:

- a dug depression that is flat and level on the bottom and has sloped sides
- an inflow and overflow area (includes piping and rock for drainage during overflow)
- rain garden soil mix (if the existing soil won't suffice)
- a mulch layer
- plants selected for their ability to remain wet during wet weather and tolerance of dryness during dry weather (typically native plants)

## Steps in Building a Rain Garden

The “Rain Garden Handbook” contains complete step by step instructions. Here are the steps in a nutshell:

- Spend some time during rainy weather (which is now) watching where the water flows into and off of your own property (remember to observe gutters, downspouts and drain pipes, driveways and other hard surfaces)
- Notice where water puddles for longer than a few hours
- Determine the site(s) for the rain garden (the handbook details how to calculate the size of the rain garden structure).
- Conduct a soil drainage test (this will determine if your chosen location will work and also whether you will need to order special soil or if your current soil is suitable).
- Mark out the rain garden with a hose or other markings (string and stakes, landscape paint, flour).
- Begin excavation/digging and construction (making sure the bottom of the hole is flat and level and the sides are properly sloped, like a bowl).
- Direct water to the rain garden from downspouts, driveways or other hard surfaces and construct a safe overflow, directing the excess water to another vegetated area, drainage swale, or storm drain.
- When the rain garden is dug and laid out, start filling in with soil, plants and mulch.
- Water in all the plants at installation (continue watering when needed until the plants become established, usually the first year or so).
- Weed regularly throughout the first year or two as needed, to allow the plants to get established.
- Monitor the plants, soil structure and mulch during the first year.
- Make adjustments when necessary (i.e. add more mulch when it shifts or washes away).
- In future years some of the plants may need digging, dividing or pruning now and then.



*Photo Courtesy Whidbey Island Conservation District*

## Other Tips for Rain Gardens

- If you'd like to pay for a rain garden installation consult with local nurseries and landscape organizations (WALP or WSNLA) for a list of professionals who are experienced in designing and installing rain gardens. Your Conservation District may also a list of local resources.
- If you choose an installer/designer/landscape professional make sure they know what they're doing – ask for photos of installations and for references.
- Determine that the installer/designer/landscape professional has taken classes and certifications on rain gardens and/or Low Impact Development (LID).
- Involve your friends and/or neighbors in constructing rain gardens in your area. You'll be able to share plants, possibly rent equipment for a day or learn together by digging and planting as a group.
- Remember not to compact the rain garden area (other than foot pressure during construction) – compacted soils do not function properly.
- Many landscape supply companies are now carrying rain garden soil mixes and mulches.
- Information on local rain garden installations can be obtained from your county's Conservation District.

Thanks to Jeff Adams, Washington Sea Grant and WSU Extension Kitsap for the information provided in this article. There are many resources available to help in making a decision for your particular property. Remember, a rain garden is not for everyone, but if it will work on your own property it's a great way to incorporate more plants into an existing planting palette and improve streams and shorelines at the same time. You possibly already have many of these plants in your own landscape, just waiting to be dug, divided and planted into the perfect rain garden feature at your home.

## Rain Garden Resources

### Rain Garden Assistance:

Washington Sea Grant  
Jeff Adams  
360-229-9398  
[jaws@uw.edu](mailto:jaws@uw.edu)  
345 6<sup>th</sup> Street Suite 550  
Bremerton, WA 98337-1874

### Links to Professional Resources Websites:

Washington State Nursery & Landscape Association  
<http://www.wsnla.org>

Washington Association of Landscape Professionals  
<http://www.walp.org>

### Rain Garden Websites:

<https://fortress.wa.gov/ecy/publications/publications/1310027.pdf> is a complete Rain Garden Handbook, designed especially for home gardeners, published and available online from WSU Extension. It includes numerous landscape plans and plant lists for a wide variety of gardening situations.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rain\\_garden](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rain_garden) is a very thorough and footnoted compilation of information on rain gardens.

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