



Rain Garden Basics

Why build a rain garden?

- Reduce storm water runoff by collecting it in a specialized garden where it can be absorbed.
- Rain garden plants have deep root systems that absorb pollutants and help prevent erosion.
- Flooding is reduced by limiting the amount of water transported to streams during rainstorms.
- Many rain garden plants attract birds, butterflies, and bees.

Choose the right place

- Take a careful look at how rainwater drains from your property.
- Where are the low spots where water collects?
- Good places for a rain garden are at least 10 feet away and downhill from the foundation of your home.
- Avoid septic fields.
- Avoid planting rain gardens under large trees.

Evaluate drainage

- Your rain garden needs to absorb water, so test the infiltration rate of your soil.
- Dig a hole 8 inches wide and 8 inches deep.
- Pour a bucket of water into it and see how long it takes to drain.
- It needs to drain an inch per hour.
- If it does not, you may need to do additional site preparation or improve infiltration.

Design the garden area

- Create a dip in the middle for the water to collect as it sinks into the soil.
- It should be shaped like a saucer, not like a bowl. This reduces the likelihood of standing water.
- Create a low berm around the area where the rainwater overflows, away from the house.
- Dig swales that lead from the downspouts to the garden and line them with rocks.
- A good size for the rain garden is 150-300 square feet. Even a small garden will work.
- Clay gardens should be large and shallow because clay does not absorb water well.

The hard part

- Define the borders and shape of the garden.
- If the area is lawn, remove the turf.
- Call JULIE at 811 before you dig. They will locate and mark any underground utilities.
- Dig down 3-6 inches in the basin of the garden so the water enters and exits the garden where you want it to flow.

- Prevent erosion by placing rocks at the inlet and outlet points.
- Mixing compost with the existing soil is good but not mandatory.
- Edge around your garden to prevent grass from creeping into the garden.

The plant part

- Consider using local native plants because they can tolerate the extremes of our climate.
- Native prairie plants have deep root systems and do not mind going from wet to dry conditions.
- Many native flowers provide nectar sources for a wide range of butterfly species.

Rain gardens have 3 moisture zones: wet, medium, dry

- Plants that prefer wet conditions are planted in the bottom of the garden.
- Plants that prefer medium soil moisture are planted on the sides of the garden.
- Plants that prefer dry soil are planted on the top edges of the garden.

Sun and shade preferences

- Full sun: 6 or more hours of direct sun, open sky overhead.
- Light shade: 4-6 hours of direct sun, considerable open sky, partial tree canopy.
- Medium shade: 2-4 hours of direct sun, beneath a canopy of trees.
- Full shade: Less than 2 hours of direct sun, early or late day, under a canopy of trees.
- Use the handout “ Rain Garden Plant List” to choose your plants.
- Keep your plants moist before planting.
- Gently separate roots of root-bound plants.
- Dig a hole deep enough to let roots hang vertically to the bottom of the hole.
- Make a small mound in the middle and let the roots drape over it.
- Leave the base of the stem at ground surface and fill in with soil.
- Once all the plants are in the ground, give them a good drink.
- Cover everything with a 1-2 inch layer of shredded hardwood mulch leaving about 1 inch of space around plant stems.

Finishing touches

- Add a few details to make the garden look manicured.
- Define a garden edge with a split rail fence or a row of similar plants.
- An arbor or a bench will help create a defined space around the garden.
- Group plants in masses of three or more for large masses of color when they bloom.
- Be careful with plant heights. Do not place really tall plants next to short plants.
- Place tallest plants in back or in the center of the garden.
- Add a garden ornament, birdbath or some decorative stone.