



## Rain Gardens

More and more homeowners are replacing exotic ornamental plants with **rain gardens**. What explains this growing trend? Well, rain gardens

- Look great!
- Are good for the environment because they don't need chemical pesticides and fertilizers, which wash into local streams when it rains
- Attract colorful birds and butterflies
- Save you time – they don't need much attention (and no mowing!)
- Save you money on all those pesticides and fertilizers you no longer need

Rain gardens contain a mix of sand, dirt, and compost two-feet deep and are filled with native plants. They are designed to capture water running off hard surfaces such as your roof or driveway. Rain gardens hold water for less than one day – long enough to filter out pollutants but not long enough for mosquitos to breed.

To create your own rain garden, follow the same steps you would for any gardening project: Make a plan, buy and install plants, and maintain the garden.

### 1) Make a Plan

To determine the best location and plants for your rain garden, start with a list of yard conditions and considerations:

- How do you use your yard now – and how would you like to use it in the future?
- How much turf grass (lawn) are you willing to replace with native plants?
- Where is water pooling in your yard or running into storm drains? (Grab an umbrella and head outside the next time it rains.)
- Which area(s) of the yard can you see from the indoor rooms you use most? (Placing a garden where you can see wildlife from inside can increase the fun.)
- Do you have preferences on plant color, fragrance, and size?
- Are you hoping to attract specific birds, butterflies, or other wildlife?

Rain gardens require a bit more planning than a native plant garden – but offer more benefits. Before you get started, consider:

- **Utilities:** You will need to identify utility lines before you dig.
- **Soil:** The ideal mix for a rain garden is 50-60 percent sand, 20-30 percent topsoil, and 20-30 percent compost – preferably pre-mixed. You can use some of the soil you dig out to create a berm (bump) on the lower end of the rain garden to help keep water in. You also need a plan to dispose of the grass and dirt you remove.

- **Size:** Rain gardens must be sized to handle the specific amount of rain water directed into them from roofs or other hard surface areas.
- **Design:** A pipe or notch in the berm allows excess water to flow out of the garden during a heavy rain. Allowing too much water to pool can drown plants.

## **2) Buy and Install Plants**

The goal of the rain garden is to soak up the rain water. Two things that will help:

**Soil Quality:** The soil around our homes is often hard-packed clay, which causes water to run off quickly. The mix of soil required for rain gardens (50 to 60 percent sand, 20 to 30 percent topsoil, and 20 to 30 percent compost) will help water soak in and provide nutrients to help plants grow quickly and stay healthy.

**Plant Selection:** The deeper the roots, the more water plants will hold (and keep out of storm drains). In addition, look at the flood tolerance of plants. If you have favorite plants that are not natives, it's okay to keep a few – as long as they can tolerate wet conditions. Aim for at least 75 percent native plants in your rain garden.

## **3) Maintain the Rain Garden**

As with any garden, it takes time for native plants to become established and fill in. For the first few growing seasons, weed control is important to ensure plants take root, and you may need to protect plants from wildlife. Water plants during the first growing season, especially if you are not getting enough rain to fill the rain garden each week. Keep the area where water enters the rain garden free of debris.