

## **Rain Gardens: Taking the Country by Storm!**

Winter Time Planning for Water Quality

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Most people could probably list at least 10 ways that a well loved garden in the yard adds to the quality of our lives. But would “my garden helps keep the stream clean” be at the top of your list? It should!

Winter is the ideal time to think about ways that you can turn your yard into a filter for polluted rain water. Rain gardens are gardens that are specifically designed to soak up rainwater, mainly from roofs, but also from driveways and patios.

Vegetation acts as a natural filter for water borne pollutants that travel across the landscape. Imagine two patches of land that are identical in every way, except that one is vegetated and the other is paved. Which would absorb the most water? Which would contribute the most water (and all the pollutants carried by water) to the nearest ditch or storm drain, and finally to a local water body? The answer seems obvious, and yet, our landscapes continue to become more and more developed. The consequence is that rainwater traveling on hard surfaces increasingly carries pollutants into local streams and lakes. This is where a simple rain garden can make a big difference.

Rain gardens look like regular flower gardens, but they are more. When it rains, a rain garden fills with a few inches of water and allows the water to slowly filter in the ground rather than running off to the storm drains. Compared to a patch of lawn, a rain garden allows about 30 % more water to soak into the ground. They also add beauty to neighborhoods and provide wildlife habitat! All that is needed is a bit of planning and preparation before planting.

When choosing a spot for a rain garden, pick a sunny location that is relatively flat or has a slight slope. Try to avoid areas where water tends to pool. The spot should have good drainage so that water can soak in within 24 hours of a storm. Good drainage also ensures that the garden won't become a breeding ground for mosquitoes!

A typical residential rain garden ranges from 100 to 300 feet, but the size will depend upon three main factors: the size of the drainage area, the type of soils on the site, and the depth of the garden. Contact Cooperative Extension for assistance in calculating the dimensions of your garden.

When you finally break ground next year, make sure that the bottom of the garden is flat and level. On a slope, more digging will be required on the uphill side. Use extra soil to build a berm on the downhill side, and be sure to make an overflow for heavy rain events!

Cooperative Extension of Onondaga County holds half-day rain garden workshops, and has developed brochures that describe rain gardens in more detail. If you or your business would like more information about rain gardens, or if you are interested in getting a supply of rain garden brochures, contact us at (314) 424-9484 x 0, or visit us on the web: [www.cce.cornell.edu/onondaga](http://www.cce.cornell.edu/onondaga)

