



Gardening with Water Quality in Mind

When you make a garden a "rain garden" you can improve local water quality while creating a beautiful natural area that will attract birds and butterflies. Rain gardens allow rain and snowmelt to seep naturally into the ground. This helps recharge our groundwater supply, and prevents a water quality problem called polluted runoff (see box below for more information on polluted runoff). Rain gardens are an important way to make our cities more attractive places to live while building urban ecological health.

What makes a garden a rain garden? All it takes is a few simple steps in the following three areas:

Landscaping — Rain gardens are designed with a dip at the center to collect rain and snow melt. Any degree of indentation is useful, from slight dips made with your garden trowel to large swales created by professional landscapers. Neatly trimmed shrubs, a crisp edge of lawn, stone retaining walls and other devices can be used to keep garden edges neat and visually appealing.

Location — Strategic placement next to hard surfaces such as alleys, sidewalks, driveways and under gutters makes your rain garden effective. Inside you'll find descriptions for how rain gardens can work in the front, side and back sections of your property.

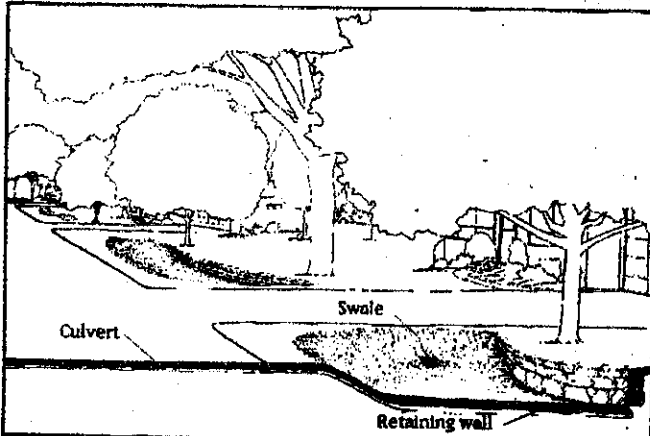
Plant choices — Hardy native species that thrive in our ecosystem without chemical fertilizers and pesticides are the best choices. Many rain gardens feature shrubs as well as wild flowers and grasses. As a rule, the less "turf" on lawns, the better it is from a water quality stand point — turf-style lawns create a harder surface which does not absorb water as readily as garden areas. Also, turf-style lawns often require chemical treatments and extra water to look uniform. Yards that feature native plants, grasses and shrubs are much easier to maintain!

What is polluted runoff?

Polluted runoff is a big problem in urban areas where much of the ground is covered with hard surfaces such as roofs, streets, parking lots and sidewalks. Before development, rain and snow melt seeped slowly into the earth. Now water flows quickly across hard surfaces, picking up pollutants — from pesticides, fertilizers and gas and oil residue — before dumping into storm drains. Once in the storm sewer system the water goes directly into local lakes, streams and wetlands. It is not treated or cleaned in any way. In the Twin Cities, all storm water eventually ends up in the Mississippi River — our precious, world-class resource that is also the source of our drinking water.

The fact sheet is part of urban watershed restoration efforts sponsored by:

*Friends of Bassett Creek 1930-A Glenwood Ave. No. • Mpls, MN 55405 • 612/374-4849
Friends of Swede Hollow 729 East 7th Street • St. Paul, MN 55106 • 651/771-2659*



This front yard garden includes a culvert to move water to neighborhood nature gardens, a stormwater infiltration swale and stone retaining wall.

Front yard gardens

Gardens along the front of homes and businesses are particularly useful from a water quality and aesthetic standpoint. Their proximity to the street makes front yard gardens an effective place to collect water that has run off of your roof, yard and sidewalk before it hits the stormwater system. Because they are highly visible to people passing by on the street or sidewalk, front yard gardens also add to the beauty of the neighborhood.

Front yard gardens can be created:

- 1) At the end of the roof gutter to capture run off from the roof.
- 2) Along front walk way to keep runoff from travelling down the sidewalk and into the storm sewer.
- 3) Along the city sidewalk to act as a buffer between your lawn and the street.
- 4) On the city-owned boulevard to stop runoff from entering the street.

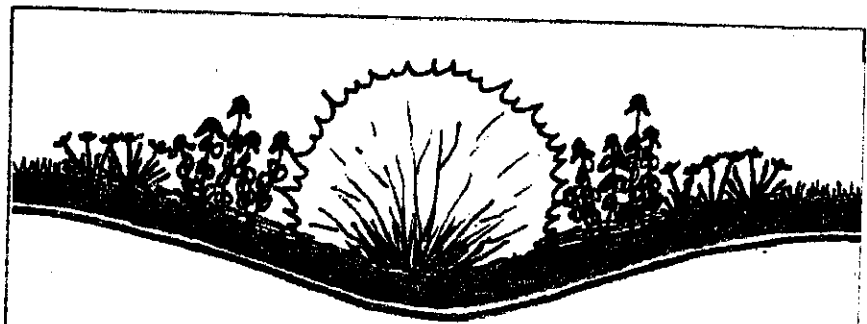
Property owners with front yards that slope to the sidewalk may choose to incorporate stone walls. With the addition of wall features, collection points can become deeper and more useful from a water filtration standpoint. If the wall is decorative and combined with neatly edged turf, the area will be beautiful throughout the year.

Side yard gardens

Gardens along the side of your home or business can catch runoff from your roof, create a "living fence" between properties and channel runoff to front or back yard gardens. Some homeowners create wide side yard gardens that become wider still in the back yard. This style of garden can minimize the amount of "turf" in your back yard that needs to be mowed. Creating wild areas along the side of your house ensures that you can look out your window and see beautiful plants, birds and butterflies. Don't plant tall shrubs right next to your windows if you are concerned about people hiding there. Also, make sure dips for capturing runoff channel water away from your house to avoid basement flooding problems.

Back yard gardens

Back yard gardens can keep water from running down the alley and into storm sewers. Like side yard gardens, back yard gardens can also help minimize the amount of high-maintenance turf-style lawn on your property. Most people place their largest gardens in the back yard. If you already have a large back yard garden, you can easily add a water filtration component by creating dips that will hold and filter water.



In any location, rain gardens' basic feature is a dip or swale. Shrubs are often planted at the center and surrounded by wild flowers.