

# RAINGARDENS

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*Is it a pond? Is it a 'water feature'?*  
No, it's a rain garden!

## **Turn that swampy spot into a useful, attractive multi-purpose rain garden.**

February in Western Washington can be wet and wild, with surprising days of sunshine and warmth. Take advantage of those welcome breaks in the weather to explore and assess your yard and garden. What makes you smile? The native plants that have established so well; the herb garden where you gather tasty salad ingredients all year; raised beds, some planted with garlic and chard, others covered with lacy cover crops that you'll dig under in the spring.

Then there's the things that make you groan. A disused compost bin, the failing fence, an unwieldy forsythia that was so cute when it was little. And what about that area where cold water floods into your garden clogs as you attempt to wade through? Perhaps your yard has a drainage problem. If so, a rain garden can do more than transform a home-grown swamp into an attractive area.

Rain garden: acts like a native forest by collecting, absorbing, and filtering stormwater runoff from roof tops, driveways, patios, and other areas that don't allow water to soak in. This reduces the amount of stormwater and pollution entering our lakes, rivers and streams.

When water runs off our roofs, parking lots, streets and lawns it picks up pollutants: pet waste, lawn fertilizers, spilled gasoline, oil, road salt, and more. Rainwater carries these pollutants into our storm drains and ditches, which empty into our lakes, streams and rivers.

Water directed into a rain garden slowly seeps into the ground instead of rushing off into storm drains. The combination of plants and soil in the rain garden help filter and process pollutants, such as oil from the driveway or chemicals and fertilizers used on the property, breaking them into less harmful elements or absorbing them so they don't reach the groundwater. That's a lot of benefit from a strategically placed depression in your yard. (No, it's not the depression you experience when you slog through Lake MyYard. This is a bowl-shaped area you'll dig out so it catches the water that currently spills over the stepping stones into the herb garden.)

Your rain garden should be created at least 10 feet from the house so water does not seep into the foundation. Choose a spot in full or partial sun with a grade of less than 12 %, in an area where water from the roof or driveway drains into it. Direct roof-runoff into the rain garden with a pipe attached to a downspout, or create a shallow depression or swale. Keep the rain garden away from septic tanks.

A typical rain garden is 12 - 18 inches deep, depending on the slope of the land. The steeper the slope, the deeper the rain garden needs to be to keep its surface level. If your soil is heavy clay, remove as much as possible (perhaps you could start making bricks?) and replace it with a mix of 50 to 60 percent sand, 20 to 30 % topsoil, and 20 to 30 % compost. Creating a small berm (short 'wall' of dirt) around the lower three sides will help the water to pool inside.



Illustration courtesy extension.oregonstate.edu

Rain gardens are landscaped areas designed to capture and treat storm water runoff from rooftops, driveways, roads, sidewalks and compacted areas of land. These gardens are usually shaped like depressions in the ground and have well-drained soils that capture and treat runoff using the vegetation, soil and microbes in the garden.

## **EVEN RAIN GARDENS NEED TO BE WATERED**

Plant the berm with drought-tolerant plants to control erosion, choosing native plants well adapted to local wet-dry cycles (see Resources.) To help these new plants establish their roots, water and weed the rain garden for the first couple of years. Yes, I said water. Not when it's raining, silly, but during dry spells and droughts. You know we have a drought nearly every August.

Even drought-tolerant plants need watering until they've been in the ground a couple of years. But you can usually count on your rain garden to keep the plants well watered, while helping to keep pollutants out of the Skagit River and Puget Sound. The fish and other water creatures will thank you.

### **JOIN SKAGIT'S MASTER GARDENERS ON FACEBOOK**

Become a Friend of the WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners on Facebook. Get timely gardening information, read the WSU research on natural pest control that was published in the New York Times, and learn why earthworms belong in your garden and red wigglers are the ones to put in your worm bin. You can also leave comments and ask questions. Go to your Facebook page and type WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners in the white Search box at the top left of the page. If you don't know what Facebook is, most children can teach you.

## GREAT NATIVE PLANTS FOR RAIN GARDENS:

### Shrubs:

Red-osier dogwood (*Cornus sericea*)  
Thimbleberry (*Rubus parviflorus*)  
Vine maple (*Acer circinatum*)  
Elderberries (*Sambucus* species)  
Evergreen huckleberry (*Vaccinium ovatum*)  
Black twinberry (*Lonicera involucrata*)  
Snowberry (*Symphoricarpos albus*)  
Hardhack/Spirea (*Spiraea douglasii*)

### Groundcovers:

Kinnikinnik (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*)  
Coastal strawberry (*Fragaria chiloensis*)  
Creeping raspberry (*Rubus pedatus*)

### Grasses and Sedges:

Wood grass (*Scirpus cyperinus*)  
Slough sedge (*Carix obnupta*)  
Merten's sedge (*Carex mertensii*)  
Rushes (*Juncus* species)

### Ferns:

Lady fern (*Athyrium filix-femina*)  
Sword fern (*Polystichum munitum*)  
Deer fern (*Blechnum spicant*)

**More at:** Rain Garden Plants:

<http://raingarden.wsu.edu/RGPlantPubKitsa/p9-09.pdf>



Above: Skagit Conservation District and Skagit Backyard Wildlife members installed this rain garden following plans by Eccos Designer LLC in 2010 for the Skagit County Commissioners building on Continental Place in Mount Vernon. The garden filters water from the building's roof. Below: The commissioner's rain garden is shown thriving in summer 2010. Photos courtesy of Skagit Conservation District.



## RESOURCES

- Rain Garden Handbook for Western Washington-Homeowners, WSU Pierce County Extension: for a paper copy, contact WSU Skagit County Extension at 360-428-4270. To download free copy: [www.scribd.com/doc/35658967/Rain-Garden-Handbook-for-Western-Washington-Homeowners](http://www.scribd.com/doc/35658967/Rain-Garden-Handbook-for-Western-Washington-Homeowners)
- Reining in the Rain, a Case Study of the City of Bellingham's Use of Rain Gardens to Manage Stormwater, Puget Sound Partnership: [www.psparchives.com/publications/our\\_work/stormwater/stormwater\\_resource/bioretenion/Rain\\_Garden\\_book.pdf](http://www.psparchives.com/publications/our_work/stormwater/stormwater_resource/bioretenion/Rain_Garden_book.pdf)
- Puget Sound Rain Gardens, WSU Snohomish County Extension: <http://raingarden.wsu.edu/>
- 'What is a Rain Garden?' 13 min. on-line presentation, WSU Clark County Extension Watershed Stewards: <http://clark.wsu.edu/volunteer/ws/WhatisaRG/index.htm>