

Rain Gardens

By Jane Billinghamurst
April 13, 2012



Rain gardens popular pick in Pacific Northwest

Rain gardens are popping up all over Skagit County. So what are they and why are they important?

A rain garden is essentially a depression that absorbs and processes storm water. Water flows in from impermeable surfaces such as roofs and driveways. The water may wash toxic materials from these surfaces, and plants and soil microbes in the garden break these pollutants down into less harmful substances. (Plants and hard-working soil microbes really are amazing.)

The processed storm water is then released slowly from the rain garden into the local groundwater supply. No more water rushing off pavement and taking petrochemicals, pesticides, and eroded soil down into storm drains and out into local water bodies, where these pollutants adversely affect aquatic life.



The Port of Anacortes has taken a playful approach at this rain garden near the O Avenue beach, attaching a decorative watering can to the downspout that directs water into the garden. **Photo by Jane Billinghamurst / WSU Skagit County Master Gardener**

There are three different zones in a rain garden. The lowest level stays wet for much of the winter but dries out in summer. In this zone, rushes, ferns, and shrubs such as red-twig dogwood and Douglas spirea are happy.

The sides of the rain garden get saturated and then dry out in between storm events. Plants that do well in this zone include thimbleberry, Oregon grape, and asters.

The top of the rain garden merges into the surrounding landscape. This zone can be planted with easy-care plants that prefer drier conditions, such as sunroses, ornamental grasses, and red-flowering currant.

In general, native plants are good choices for rain gardens as they survive in our climate without extra care and provide food and shelter for beneficial insects and for wildlife.

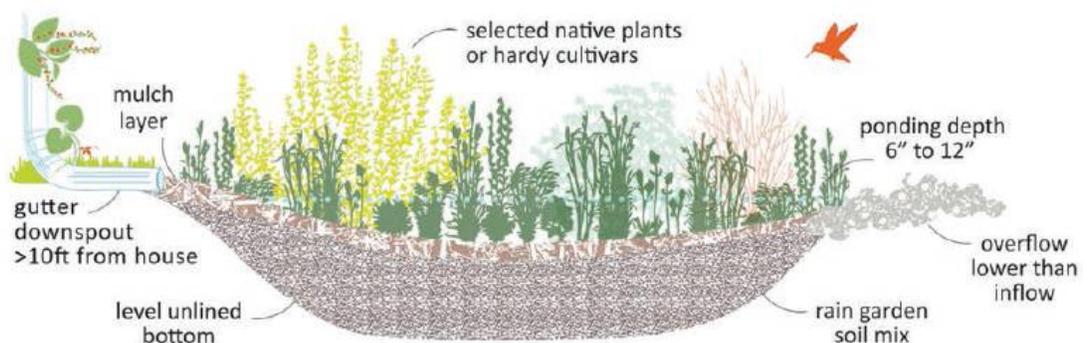
Once they have been installed, rain gardens are low maintenance. This is important because every time you walk in a garden, you compact the soil. To function properly and drain, rain gardens need open-textured soil, so it is good to walk in them as little as possible.

So it's okay to be a lazy gardener in a rain garden. A two- to three-inch layer of woody mulch on the soil surface will keep weeds down, and dense plantings leave little room for weeds to grow. Leaves and woody debris left in the garden create an ideal habitat for pollutant-busting soil microbes, and feed both microbes and plants as they slowly decay.

A rain garden is doing what the forest used to do before it was cleared away—slowing down and absorbing rainfall so local aquifers are recharged, diminishing erosion due to storm events, and keeping toxic substances out of our waterways.

Anatomy of a rain garden

Courtesy of
12,000 Rain
Gardens



Because rain gardens mimic natural systems, they have a more relaxed appearance than carefully manicured landscapes. Do not let their relaxed appearance fool you, however. They are working hard to improve the health of Puget Sound.

To find out more about how rain gardens function, where there are rain gardens you can visit, and how you can install your own rain garden at home, visit the web site for the 12,000 Rain Gardens program (www.12,000raingardens.org). This program is a partnership between WSU Extension and Stewardship Partners. The goal is to install 12,000 rain gardens in Puget Sound by 2013 to soak up 160 million gallons of polluted runoff that would otherwise enter our waterways.

As part of 12,000 Rain Gardens, the WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners are offering public rain garden education. On April 17, 1 to 2:30 pm, sustainable landscaping specialist Zsofia Pazstor will give an introduction to rain gardens at the WSU-NWREC auditorium in Mount Vernon (16650 SR 536, Memorial Highway). Free, no registration necessary.

On June 15, 10 am to 5 pm, Erica Guttman from WSU Thurston County Extension will lead an advanced workshop (also at WSU-NWREC) with hands-on exercises for siting, designing, and installing rain gardens. \$30 (\$20 for active Master Gardeners). Register with MG Program Coordinator Lisa Hervieux at 360-428-4270.

Resources:

- Check www.12000raingardens.org for the following resources



- WSU Rain Garden Handbook for Homeowners (free PDF download)
- Rain garden planting video