

It's Raining, It's Pouring – Consider A Rain Garden by Barbara Bravo

If this gardening season is anything like 2009, there will be an abundance of rain. So what's a gardener to do? Teasing aside, we can all think about creating a Rain Garden.

“What is a Rain Garden?”

A Rain Garden is very similar to most gardens with this exception: rather than it being the raised beds that many of us are accustomed to, rain gardens are shallow landscaped depressions designed to capture and filter rain water from rooftops, driveways and patios. Why is that important? Hidden from our eyes, but present nevertheless, are fertilizers, pesticides and petrochemicals that are washed away during a rainstorm. These pollutants find their way into our ground water, streams and rivers. The water captured by the garden slowly seeps into the ground filtering out these pollutants. In the process the plants will take up the nutrients while the microorganisms in the soil will break down the pesticides.

Basics Things You Should Know

Before you grab your shovel and dash outside to dig a rain garden there are a few things you need to know. For safety's sake before you dig, make sure you know where the underground water, sewer, gas or electric lines are located and avoid them. You will need to have a soil test done by a reputable lab to determine your soil composition and fertility. The ideal soil composition for a rain garden is 50-60% sand. Clayey soil conditions will not work for this kind of garden and, they are not appropriate for areas where there is standing water because of poor drainage conditions.

Site Selection

The best site you can choose is sunny, far enough from trees to avoid tree roots and has less than a 11% slope. If you plan to collect rainwater from your home's roof, you'll want to site it at least 10' away from the foundation and within view of a downspout. Extend the downspout either above or below ground so that the end of the pipe enters the rain garden on one side. Equally important is an overflow drain opposite where the water comes in. In the event of a severe storm, excess water will flow out. A typical garden for a homeowner is about one hundred square feet. It can be round, oval, rectangular or kidney shaped. It's your choice.

Creating A Basin

As mentioned earlier the rain garden is a shallow depression. Soil conditions will determine the depth of the bed. When digging the basin, the excavated soil should be used to fill in spots that may be too low. It is very important that the basin be level. Any unused soil will be used to form a berm. A berm is a low-mounded hill of soil that will help keep the water in the basin. Your hard work is about to be rewarded. Now you get to choose the plants.

Choose Native Plants

It's best to have a variety of plants and the focus should be on native plants. These are tough and hardy plants that are accustomed to our Hudson Valley conditions of drench and drought. There are plant lists available both on-line and through your county's cooperative extension. What you need to look for are plants that thrive in wetland conditions. They may be trees, shrubs, perennials, and grasses. Some examples are River Birch, Winterberry holly and New York Asters. Many are wildlife friendly and inviting to birds and butterflies. Choose plants that vary in height, leaf texture and bloom time for a colorful pleasing effect. If you have a problem with deer, choose deer resistant plants or consider fencing.

Maintenance

One of the many attributes of native plants is their low maintenance. The rain garden, because we specifically want it to act as a filter for pollutants, will not be fertilized and no pesticides or herbicides are used. Pruning is minimal and mainly done to remove dead or damaged branches and sometimes to open up a shrub for good air circulation. Another maintenance concern is weeding. There will always be weeds and these should be removed promptly. Don't let them get established. During the first year the rain garden will need to be watered regularly if rain is scarce. The addition of a soaker hose pinned to the soil with 2" of mulch over it is an easy effective way to supply water. Just hook it up to your regular garden hose and turn on the tap about 1/4 to 1/2 way. You'll know that you have watered enough when the soil is soaked to a depth of about 8".

Now you know what a Rain Garden is and the important role it plays in protecting and improving our water quality. Other good reasons to build a rain garden are that it will add beauty and value to your landscape while providing food for birds, bees and butterflies. The antics of birds, buzzing of bees and fluttering of butterflies all add to the visual pleasure we can enjoy whenever we take the time to stroll around the garden.

Barbara Bravo is a Garden Coach, Master Gardener and Ceramic Artist. She has 24 years experience gardening in Ulster County where the wildlife is plentiful and where she continues to learn peaceful co-existence with nature. www.enterthegarden.com and www.bravoceramics.com

Sidebar

Get a complete analysis of your soil through your county Cooperative Extension, costs is about \$20.

Be mindful of buried utility lines, before you dig call 811

A helpful article, Rain Gardens 101, can be found at <http://www.groundwater.org/ta/raingardens.html>

Costs for creating a residential Rain Garden is about \$3 to \$4 a square foot.

A local resource for Native Plants:

Catskill Native Nursery www.catskillnativenursery.com

Some plants you might want to include are Bee Balm, Cardinal Flower, Blue Flag Iris, Highbush blueberry, American cranberry and Winterberry

Plant lists resources

<http://www.bbg.org>

<http://raingardenalliance.org/planting/plantlist>