

Nature's filter: New concept in gardening catching on

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MADISON -- There are perennial gardens, vegetable gardens and children's gardens. Now the Department of Natural Resources is interested in having people grow plants with a special purpose.

They want people to grow rain gardens.

A rain garden is a collection of special native wildflowers and grasses whose purpose is to catch water that runs off roofs, driveways and lawns after a storm. Because their roots are able to withstand being submerged in water for a while, these plants filter the rainwater and delay it from traveling to storm gutters and sewers.

By doing so, it is estimated that up to 30 percent more water soaks into the ground and is prevented from entering the storm sewer system.

Creating a rain garden is a fairly new concept, said Kristi Minahan, a communications specialist with the Wisconsin DNR.

"Roger Bannerman has been working on his for about four years," Minahan said of the DNR nonpoint source pollution specialist who co-authored a 32-page brochure on the subject.

Landowners can create a rain garden in a spot on their lawns away from septic systems and in full or partial sun, but not where water already collects after a storm, she said. Whether the garden is 140 square feet or 10 square feet, it acts as a filter for the rainwater.

"You usually create a shallow depression -- about 4 to 8 inches deep and plant native plants that have different levels of water tolerance at the different depths," she said.

The brochure available from the DNR lists the types of plants that can be used and includes a few sample designs to get people started.

"We suggest a mix of wildflowers, grasses and sedges," Minahan said. "Some of them have nice, deep roots that can withstand being submerged in water."

For obvious reasons, the gardens shouldn't be located immediately off a rain gutter spout, and small plants should be planted the first year instead of using seeds that can wash away.

While the brochure includes information on how people can calculate the amount of runoff coming from their roofs and lawns, Minahan said it's not necessary to go through all the calculations to design a small garden.

And while size does matter in the amount of water a rain garden will collect, anything is better than nothing, she said.

"The bigger you make it, the more storm water it will capture," she said. "But even if it is a small one, you're still capturing, say 10 percent, of the water that would have ended up in the storm sewer."

Minahan admits that one man's wildflowers and sedges can be seen as another man's weeds.

"It's a matter of perceptions," she said. "To make it look tidy, some people put a decorative border around the garden -- then it doesn't look like weeds. After a while, it starts looking like a garden."

Minahan said the idea of creating a rain garden has sparked interest in places like Madison and Milwaukee. "It's a fun project for families, too," she said.

There are studies ongoing to track the effectiveness of the rain gardens in stopping important storm water from exiting lawns and landscapes into streams, rivers and lakes, she said. The DNR will track those studies and report on the results.

Copies of the free, 32-page brochure are available by visiting the UW Extension Web site at <http://cleanwater.uwex.edu/pubs/raingardens/index.html>, or by contacting Minahan at (608) 266-7055 or by e-mail at kristi.minahan@dnr.state.wi.us.

Rain gardens:

- Increase the amount of water that filters into the ground, which recharges local and regional aquifers.
- Help protect communities from flooding and drainage problems.
- Help protect streams and lakes from pollutants carried by urban storm water -- lawn fertilizers and pesticides, oil and other fluids that leak from cars, and numerous harmful substances that wash off roofs and paved areas.
- Enhance the beauty of yards and neighborhoods.
- Provide valuable habitat for birds, butterflies and many beneficial insects.

<http://www.eagleherald.com/rgar0812.htm>