What is a Rain Garden?

A "Rain Garden" is simply a shallow depression in your yard that’s planted with native wetland or wet-prairie wildflowers and grasses. Its purpose is to gather, filter and infiltrate rainwater into the ground (restoring the aquifer), provide habitat for wetland fauna and deliver enjoyment for its owner (that’s you!).

Build your own Rain Garden

For more details on Rain Garden construction, go to: www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/water/wm/dsfm/shore/raingarden.htm.


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What is a Rain Garden?
A Rain Garden is simply a shallow depression that is planted with native wetland or wet-prairie wildflowers and grasses. It is designed to collect water that runs off your roof or is discharged from your sump pump. Rain Gardens are gaining popularity for three reasons:

1. Rain Gardens make good use of stormwater runoff; the native plants filter and clean runoff before infiltrating it into the ground, to restore the aquifer (our underground water supply). And by keeping runoff out of storm drains, rain gardens also help protect water quality in local lakes and streams.

2. Rain Gardens are planted with beautiful, hardy, low-maintenance native perennial plants.

3. Rain Gardens provide food and shelter for birds, butterflies and beneficial insects, such as mosquito-devouring dragonflies!

Simple Construction
It’s easy! Just follow these easy steps:

1. Dig a shallow depression with a level bottom. Size depends on your type of soil and the area of your roof and/or drainage area. A good guessimate is 20% of your drain area if your soil is sandy, 30% for loam, and 40-50% for clay.

2. Direct your downspout or sump pump outlet to your Rain Garden, either by digging a shallow swale—a linear depression designed to channel water—or by routing it through a buried 4” PVC pipe.

3. Plant your raingarden with native plants appropriate for your soil type and sun/shade conditions. See the examples below for ideas.

4. If it doesn’t rain, water your planting every other day for the first few weeks, until plants are growing and well-established.

Once your native Rain Garden plants are established, they’ll thrive without additional watering. Fertilizers are not recommended.

Too much of a good thing
During heavy rains, your rain garden may overflow. Make sure this overflow follows the drainage pattern originally designed for your lot. Test this by filling your depression with a garden hose. If it routes the water away from your home. Full sun is best for the two example designs below. Try to choose a spot that gets at least a half-day of sunlight. A depression of two to six inches is fine. Slope the sides gradually from the edge to the level bottom. For heavy clay soils, dig the rain garden deeper or mix topsoil with sand and compost to improve drainage. Test this with a garden hose. French drains can also aid infiltration.

Local Genotypes
Make sure the genotype of the plants/seed you use is proper for your area. A Yellow Coneflower from Texas isn’t the same as a Yellow Coneflower from Minnesota, and shouldn’t be planted there. It might not do well — or worse, it might do too well and crowd out surrounding species. Avoid this by using genotypes proper for your area. Unfortunately, growers who sell non-local genotypes (knowingly or not) may not even keep collection or source records, so the only dependable strategy is to buy from well-respected growers with established track records.

More Tips
- Weed biweekly until native plants are established.
- Avoid using lawn fertilizers near the Rain Garden. They stimulate weeds without benefitting your garden.
- Plant your raingarden with native plants appropriate for your area. A Yellow Coneflower from Minnesota, and shouldn’t be planted there. It might not do well — or worse, it might do too well and crowd out surrounding species. Avoid this by using genotypes proper for your area. Unfortunately, growers who sell non-local genotypes (knowingly or not) may not even keep collection or source records, so the only dependable strategy is to buy from well-respected growers with established track records.

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