

Realize Raingardens Rochester

PREVENTING POLLUTION THROUGH BEAUTIFICATION

BY EMILY WATKINS

What do fertilizers, pesticides, oil, litter, dog poop, grass clippings, leaves, dirt, soap and salt all have in common? They are pollutants that, if not handled properly, can end up in our local lakes, rivers, and aquifers—dirtying the water we drink and the water we use for recreation. These pollutants can also disturb the habitats of animals, bugs and plants.

The City of Rochester is trying to mitigate the effects of these pollutants by educating its citizens. Under the watch of Allison Plute, the City's Storm Water Education Assistant, Rochester is making headway toward beautifying our city—using raingardens to work with nature instead of against it.

When water runs off impervious surfaces (roofs, roads, sidewalks and parking lots) it drags pollutants to the nearest gutter, eventually depositing them in our local surface waters. In some areas of Rochester, the water entering the storm drains empties directly into the Zumbro River or its tributaries without treatment.

A beautiful option for diverting rainwater

Rainwater can be captured and routed via gutters and down spouts to a raingarden: a garden with a depression populated with long-rooted, water-loving plants that can help to slow, infiltrate and hold water.

In 2009, The City of Rochester launched a program called Realize Raingardens Rochester (RRR). “It’s something anyone can do to help keep our water clean, safe and abundant,” says Jan Tarnow, a member of the program’s taskforce and an experienced raingardener. Tarnow and her husband plan to install a raingarden in their backyard this summer and host a raingarden party to show off their pollution-preventing plots.

RRR uses this Tupperware party-like way to introduce residents to raingardens. You invite friends and neighbors over for food and drink, and the City provides you with a kit containing raingarden games and information. A game called Stormwater Mocktail shows you what water looks like with pollutants (hint: it’s not pretty).

I want a raingarden. Now what?

You might have some questions about the shape, size and location of the garden, the types of plants to use and the cost.

The shape of your garden will depend on the size of your yard, your existing



Raingardens are popping up all over Rochester, including this site along the Zumbro River near the Mayo Field parking lot.



The Peace Church parking lot expansion project included a large-scale “infiltration” raingarden using native plants and grasses to capture storm water runoff.



Chuck and Dorey Johnson had water problems due to uphill neighbors. Chuck designed and installed a raingarden to solve the problem.

landscaping and what you find attractive. Plute says any size provides benefits. Native plants are recommended for their beauty, attractiveness to wildlife, and long root length, which is much longer than the roots of grass in a typical residential lawn. A longer root system helps to hold soil in place and encourages infiltration of water downward—instead of horizontally across the ground toward surface waters.

Non-native plants can be used as well—even standards like spirea and day lilies can be adaptable. The “bottom” of your raingarden (the end to which the water flows) will stay more moist, so the plants you choose for that end will have to tolerate large amounts of water. However, they must also tolerate drought for years with low amounts of rainfall.

The cost of your raingarden will depend on whether you do it yourself or hire help with the design and installation. It will also depend on what kind of plants you choose. You may pay anywhere from a couple of dollars to 20 dollars per square foot.

To defray some of the cost, for the second year in a row, Realize Raingardens Rochester is offering cost-share grants to several homeowners who apply. RRR will reimburse 50 percent of your installation costs, up to \$750, if you are selected for one of these grants. There are a couple

of requirements, including photo documentation of the process and hosting a raingarden party.

Getting your hands dirty

Before you get out your shovel, there are a couple of things to do. First, call Gopher State One Call at 800-252-1166 before you dig. Second, do a soil test to find the right spot for your garden and find out if your soil needs modification, says Jeff Feece of Sargent’s Gardens.

Our area is fortunate to have many garden centers offering a variety of services. Feece says Sargent’s can help with design, choosing plants and installing the garden.

Plute says she would like to see more raingardens installed, but she is also eager to know about existing plots and to mark them with signs, encouraging passersby to take a closer look. Ultimately she would like to create a map and tour of area raingardens.

You can find out more about raingardens and how to install them, including what plants to use, how to host a raingarden party, how to apply for a grant and register your raingarden at rochesterstormwater.com/r_r_r.asp. For more information, contact Allison Plute at 507-328-2440 or aplute@rochestermn.gov.

Emily Watkins is excited for the snow to melt and for gardening season to begin.

Another option for collecting rainwater

You can also reduce runoff from your property with a rain barrel: a vessel placed under a down spout to catch and hold rainwater from a roof top. This is a great two-for-one: you keep water out of the streets and provide water for your garden and yard. A bonus: a \$10 rebate per rain barrel from Rochester Public Utilities (RPU) for having up to five rain barrels that are each at least 40 gallons. Applications are available at rpu.org or in their customer service office. Include your receipt from purchase, or if you’ve built your own, a receipt for your materials and a picture.

Dates to remember

March 3: Grant writing workshop

May 1: Grant application due date

June 5: Rain barrel and compost bin sale at Apache Mall



Bob Sixta used his raingarden grant to create a dry creek bed and route rooftop runoff into the raingarden.