What Is a Rain Garden?

Rain gardens are beautiful natural landscape features that require less maintenance and fewer chemicals than lawns. Rain gardens capture runoff from impervious areas such as roofs and driveways and allow it to seep slowly into the ground. Most importantly, rain gardens help preserve nearby streams and lakes by reducing the amount of runoff and filtering pollutants.

Why Plant a Rain Garden?

Rain gardens provide for the natural infiltration of rainwater into the soil. This helps to filter out pollutants including fertilizer, pesticides, oil, heavy metals and other chemicals that are carried with the rainwater that washes off your lawn, rooftop and driveway. Rain gardens also reduce peak storm flows, helping to prevent stream bank erosion and lowering the risk for local flooding. By collecting and using rainwater that would otherwise run off your yard, rain gardens allow you to have an attractive landscape with less watering.

How Do Rain Gardens Work?

A rain garden receives runoff water from roofs or other impervious (hard) surfaces such as driveways. The rain garden holds water on the landscape so that it can be taken in by plants and soak into the ground instead of flowing into a street and down a storm drain or drainage ditch. The plants, mulch and soil in a rain garden combine natural physical, biological and chemical processes to remove pollutants from runoff. Many pollutants will be filtered out and break down in the soil over time.

Water should stand in a rain garden no longer than 24 hours after the rain stops. Mosquitoes cannot complete their breeding cycle in this length of time, so a rain garden should not increase mosquito populations.

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Rain gardens are best located in natural depressions (low lying areas where water flows naturally). They should be sited at least 10 feet from a house or building. While they should not be next to building foundations, rain gardens near impervious surfaces such as driveways, patios and sidewalks help capture the runoff from these areas.

1. Locate a site for a rain garden in a natural depression in the landscape.

2. Determine the size and shape of the rain garden.

3. Mix organic matter into the soil within the rain garden by spreading 2 to 4 inches of compost over the area and mixing the organic matter in with the existing soil.

4. Establish a grass or groundcover border along the upper edge of the rain garden to slow down the runoff water as it enters the rain garden, and do the same over the berm to stabilize it as a border of the rain garden.

5. Once plants are in place, cover the garden with a 3" layer of mulch. Lighter mulches such as pine bark and straw will float in and replace it with a more porous "rain garden soil." A soil mix suitable for rain gardens is 50-60 percent sand, 20-30 percent topsoil, and 20-30 percent compost. The clay content in the rain garden soil replacement mix should be no more than 10 percent.

6. As the plants in the rain garden mature, there will be less need for mulch and weeding. Rain gardens should be relatively low maintenance if the correct plants are chosen.

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8. Find the infiltration zone in the area that the rain garden will be built in. The area with a slow change of more than 12 feet down is a good infiltration area. These areas are suitable for rain gardens. Further, if you have a septic system, avoid planting a rain garden over the top of the drainfield. It is recommended that a landscape professional be consulted if you plan to build a rain garden larger than 300 square feet.

9. The extra soil removed from the rain garden should be used on the downhill side of the garden to create a berm, an earthen dam or barrier that will keep the water in the rain garden. The top of the berm should not be higher than the uphill edge of the rain garden (no more than 12 inches high). The rain garden should be designed to hold no more than 6 inches of water above the ground surface.

10. A rain garden should be curvy in shape and is best situated with the longest length perpendicular to the slope of the land.

11. Use rope to lay out the boundary of the rain garden.

12. Begin by removing soil in the rain garden so that the deepest part is about 8 -10 inches deep.

13. The bottom of the rain garden should be as level as possible so some minor grading may be necessary.

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15. Fix organic material into the soil within the rain garden by spreading 2 to 4 inches of compost over the area and mixing the organic material in with the existing soil.

16. The soil is acidic (has a low pH), add lime to neutralize the pH of the soil. Contact a local University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service office for soil testing and recommendations. Contact a local University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service office for soil testing and recommendations.

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