

# Protecting the environment never looked better

By ROBERT CLOUD  
Post Editor

A small garden behind the Stiebs Jeep dealership on Jefferson Street not only makes the parking lot more attractive, it also protects the environment.

Last fall, Harold Stiebs purchased a lot behind his building. He soon found that the lot had a tendency to flood across the alley into his neighbor's property and Stiebs began searching for a solution.

"The flooding is a minor problem compared to keeping water out of the sewer system," Stiebs said. "Water runoff from parking lots is some of the worst pollution there is."

Contaminants from parking lots include winter salt applications, oil and fluids that have leaked from cars. These can make their way through the stormwater system into rivers and lakes.

Stiebs learned that the Waupaca County Water Quality Committee, a



## RAIN GARDEN

Harold Stiebs and Lisa Neuenfeldt examine the wildflowers that have flourished in a rain garden.

citizen-run group, had programs to help landowners deal with their stormwater runoff. He received help with designing a rainwater catch basin and financial assistance to build the

catch basin.

Lisa Neuenfeldt, with the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation

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Services, designed a wildflower garden for Stiebs that serves as a catch basin. The garden is about 30 feet by 30 feet and filled with colorful purple and yellow cone flowers, bright purple bergamot, spiderwort, butterfly weed and various prairie grasses.

"These are all native plants," Neuenfeldt said. "They don't need to be fertilized or watered."

The garden serves as a small natural habitat, attracting birds, butterflies and bumblebees. The plants also help capture the polluted runoff from the parking lot and the alley.

"They've got very deep root systems that absorb the runoff," Neuenfeldt said. The plants also make the soil more porous, so the garden can absorb about 10 times the amount of rainwater that a lawn will absorb.

Stiebs dug out a 3 foot deep catch basin, then covered it with black dirt and planted the seedlings last fall. He also put up a split-rail fence around the garden.

He was surprised at how quickly the plants matured. Most of them grew to their full height and flowered this summer.

"The plants were very small when I planted them," Stiebs said. "When it rained, they were often covered in water and I thought they would drown. But the soil quickly absorbed the water and the plants have thrived."

Neuenfeldt said she designed the garden with plants that would look attractive, withstand an inundation

and provide some habitat.

"If we put more of these in the city, there would be a lot less storm water going into the river," Neuenfeldt said.

Bruce Bushweiler, the Waupaca County conservationist, agreed that more rain gardens could help have a positive impact on the local environment.

"Any time we can retain rainwater where it falls, we're improving water quality," Bushweiler said. "Retaining the water keeps it from going down the gutter into our rivers and lakes."

Bushweiler said all new commercial construction is required to have a stormwater management plan. He pointed to Baylake Bank on West Fulton as another example of an attractive catch basin for parking lot runoff.

"You'd never know that's what it is," Bushweiler said, regarding the catch basin at Baylake Bank. "It looks like a little rock garden."

Bushweiler said rain gardens can be used at apartment complexes and even homes to help improve local water quality. He said assistance for these projects is available by calling the Waupaca County Land and Water Conservation Department at (715) 258-6245.

"All the stuff we do as government will never add up to what individuals can do on their own," Bushweiler said.

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