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When the forecast calls for rain, Dave Edwards sits back and takes it all in

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Naturally speaking, Dave Edwards is a punctilious proponent of precipitation. Good thing, too.

The driving rains that doused the area July 30 taxed area sewage treatment plants, especially in Neenah-Menasha, which exceeded its 65 million-gallon design. Neenah-Menasha Sewage Treatment Plant manager Randy Much said that the influent channel overflowed 300,000 gallons in a two-hour period, traveling down the road, down the storm sewer and into the Winnebago River.

The excess rain in Edwards' Appleton yard, on the other hand, went where nature intended — back into the ground, all thanks to his recently planted rain garden. Edwards' yard is featured in today's members-only tour presented by Wild Ones Native Plants, Natural Landscapes.

Rain gardens, defined as shallow depressions designed to collect rain, are somewhat of a wave of the future, according to Kristi Minahan, runoff management communications specialist with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources in Madison.

"It is really starting to get a lot of attention, especially in the Milwaukee and Madison areas," she said. "And now we are starting to get inquiries from the rest of the state. It is such a neat concept. It's a beautiful thing, great for the environment and a good family project."

According to Applied Ecological Services Inc. in Brodhead, native landscaping — which is incorporated into rain gardens — enriches the soil, decreases water runoff and filters pollution caused by fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides and even lawnmowers.

Rain garden plantings and bacteria then do their work to clean the water as it seeps into the ground.

According to www.consciouschoice. com, storm water is carried from sewers and tunnels into treatment plants, which are a necessary evil. Parking lots, sidewalks, streets and roofs all prevent rain from doing what it is supposed to do— filter through the ground.

The water channeled into a rain garden doesn't get as contaminated, Minahan said. "It's not running through the city streets and picking up all the grease and oil and contaminants like that. It is great for water quantity problems and water quality."

July's torrential rains proved to be a good test of Edwards' handiwork, which handled the deluge with ease. Edwards dug the underground tunnels from the ends of a garage and house eaves troughs that meander into the rain garden.

"Instead of having the water run into ditches, it runs into a depression and the plants and absorbs into the ground," Edwards said.

Said Minahan: "We recommend you don't use seeds, which wash away easily, but to use young plants. You do have to do some weeding and a little bit of watering the first couple of years, but once it's established, you're pretty set to go and they are pretty hardy."

A lot of people like to calculate how big the rain garden has to be to take care of all the rainwater on their property. The DNR has a new booklet, "Rain Gardens: A How-to Manual for Homeowners," that lays out the process easily and discusses which factors to consider when building a rain garden.

The plantings, which will take a good three years to peak, include Michigan lily, Red Swamp milkweed, Mountain mint and Saw Tooth sunflower, to name just a few.

"The plants will take the real wet period and the dry, too," Edwards said.

Maple wood chips cover the ground and keep weeds at bay.

Rain gardens also help to recharge groundwater tables, Minahan said. "A lot of urban areas in Wisconsin are seeing their water tables drop because as populations grow, we are using more water and we're not recharging the groundwater as much as we used to. As we develop more pavement, rainwater runs off into the surface waters instead of filtering back down into the soil like it would in a natural system. With a rain garden, you are allowing that water to soak in where it falls, which can replenish water tables."

While the rain garden absorbed front-yard rainwater, Edwards' wet-mesic prairie garden, planted about four years ago, handled 18 inches of water that accumulated at the back left end of his yard, which abuts neighbors on three sides. Runoff from the two adjacent back yards, which sit on a higher elevation, caused somewhat of a problem for the two lower yards.

"Whenever it was wet, I couldn't mow it," Edwards said. "It would accumulate there."

To take care of the problem, he planted the wet-mesic garden, which absorbed 18 inches of rain during the July storm.

In his book, "The Vegetation of Wisconsin," John Curtis said plant communities are arranged in a kind of soil-moisture continuum that is divided into five segments: xeric (requiring only a small amount of moisture), dry-mesic, mesic (requiring a moderate amount of moisture), wet-mesic and wet.

The smell of the garden makes one forget it is located in the city. Black-Eyed Susans, Green-headed coneflowers, coreopsis and Sweet Indian plantain add a splash of color throughout the summer months. Birds and butterflies now call the garden home.

To obtain a copy of "Rain Gardens: A How-to Manual for Homeowners," download it http://clean-water.uwex.edu/pubs/ raingarden/index.html, or request a hard copy from Minahan at 608-266-7055 or kristi.minahan@dnr.state.wi.us.
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