

# Growing flowers for a rainy day

Much prettier than a storm drain, gardens are an easy, attractive way to manage nonpoint pollution

**By Monique Balas**  
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How does your garden grow?

Green Bay resident Julie Bowden's garden grows from the excess rainwater that runs off the downspout on her neighbor's new garage.

Bowden, who started her rain garden about a year and a half ago, is one of a growing number of people who have found a gardener's way of turning lemons into lemonade: She's turned runoff water from her neighbor's garage into a way to raise a colorful garden of bergamot and daisies.

"I want to get more gardens, they're so pretty," said Bowden, whose Green Bay rain garden has enabled her to maintain a good relationship with her neighbors while being environmentally responsible.

"What happened was, our neighbors built a big garage and their downspouts were flooding our yard," Bowden said. "When you build structures, there's less place for the water to go into the ground."

At first, she said, she and her husband were irritated about the flooding in their yard. Then they got the idea for a rain garden after Ed Bowden spoke with Paul Hartman, a horticulture agent at the University of Wisconsin-Extension.

Rain gardens are planted with native wildflowers and vegetation that can withstand being drenched by water for short periods of time.

Absorbing water that would otherwise run onto streets, rain gardens let about 30 percent more water soak into the ground, said Kristi Minahan, a runoff management communications specialist for the DNR.

"The goal is to use native plants in your rain garden, because native plants will be heartier," Minahan said.

What makes them hearty is their deeper roots, she said, and the fact they are acclimated to Wisconsin weather conditions.

The gardens are a way to control the massive amounts of excess water that can hit the streets during big rainstorms.

Instead of letting excess water roll off rooftops and driveways into a nearby lake or street, homeowners can use gardens to sponge up rainwater, Minahan said.

Stormwater "can be absorbed right there on site, so it cuts down (on) the amount of runoff the city has to deal with in terms of quantity," Minahan said.

The DNR has a new 32-page brochure, "Rain Gardens: A How-to Manual for Homeowners," with detailed instructions for starting a rain garden. The DNR Web site also provides an interactive native plant list.

By absorbing the rainwater, the gardens are efficient ways of controlling stormwater and reducing nonpoint source pollution. Otherwise known as polluted runoff, nonpoint pollution occurs when water from rain or melting snow washes soil particles, fertilizer, pesticides and other contaminants into lakes, streams and groundwater.

Wisconsin's Department of Natural Resources blames urban and rural nonpoint pollution for the state's water quality problems. The agency claims it has damaged or degraded about 40 percent of the state's streams and 90 percent of its inland lakes.

The gardens also filter and recharge water tables, which are dropping as urban development replaces soil with asphalt. By the time the water gets through the soil and down to the water table, it's clean again, Hartman said.

"Somehow, it's the ultimate solution," he said. "You're really preventing a lot of pollution."

Hartman said if all the new homes in the Baird Creek area grew rain gardens, there would be fewer problems with stormwater management.

Aside from reducing the workload of local sewer systems, rain gardens would help eliminate the need for expensive retention ponds, he said.

In his own garden, Hartman is growing prairie blazing star, nodding pink onion, marsh (red) milkweed and New England aster. He said plans are in the works to start a garden at the Extension in the fall.

"Probably the reason I started it was, I didn't want all the water settling in the garden, because it floods out the garden and wrecks out my vegetables," he said.

Hartman, like Bowden, said the garden requires very little maintenance other than an occasional weeding.

"It's really turned out great - we don't get the flooding we used to have," Bowden said. "I've pretty well left it alone and it just grows and grows."

FYI:

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

<http://www.greenbaynewschron.com/page.html?article=121700>