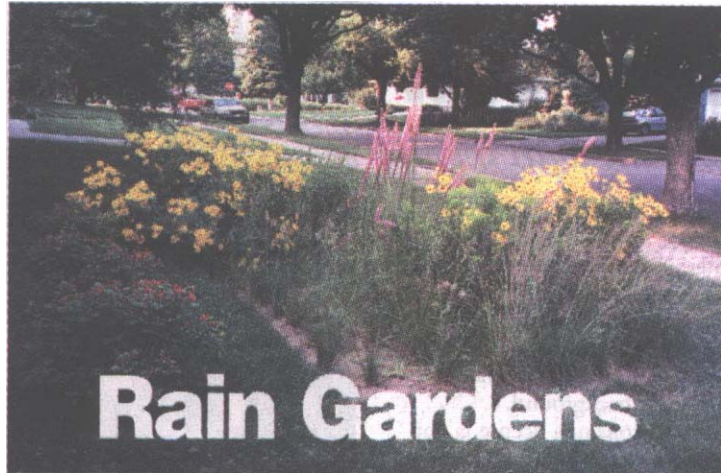


**BY JACKIE BRADLEY**  
*For Capital Newspapers*

There is a very simple and attractive way to limit stormwater runoff to help protect our lakes and watersheds: rain gardens.

Dave Watts, owner of Watts Landscape Service, said the rain garden, a relatively new concept, is quickly becoming a popular feature in home landscaping.

"A rain garden is a manmade depression in the ground used as a landscape tool to improve water quality," said Watts. The rain garden is usually planted with native plants, collects rain water runoff, and stores it so it can be filtered and absorbed by the soil.



Rain gardens are designed to absorb stormwater runoff from surfaces such as roofs, driveways and parking lots. As such they

should be 10 to 15 feet away from buildings where runoff naturally flows toward the garden instead of toward the basement.

"I predict that in less than 10 years, rain gardens will be required in all new home construction to keep storm water runoff on the property," Watts said.

"Typically, when rain falls on the roof, it is captured in the gutters, runs to down spouts and into the yard where it is carried in drainage swales off the property and into the street and street gutters," said Watts. In a subdivision, driveway water also runs to the street, into the stormwater collection system and then, to the lakes."

According to Roger

Bannerman, a DNR environmental specialist, polluted runoff from urban areas is degrading our lakes and streams. This runoff contains pollutants such as chemical fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides. Rain gardens can reduce the amount of polluted runoff to lakes, rivers, wetlands and streams.

The more rain gardens there are in a neighborhood, the greater the benefits. "In an urbanized watershed that is half residential, if everyone put a rain garden in their yard, the amount of annual runoff reaching lakes and streams could be reduced by about 15 percent. If rain gardens were placed to include runoff from streets, the annual runoff that reaches lakes and streams could be reduced by as much as 35 percent," said Bannerman.

Watts cited some reasons rain

gardens make good ecological sense. "They help diminish the negative impact on the environment by recharging the water table while reducing pollutants entering the lakes," he said. "Rain gardens can provide a creative play area for children. Contain varying levels of water and a variety of plant materials, rain gardens provide diversity in a child's environment. They stimulate a child's imagination and invite his involvement by creating a wildlife habitat that attracts species such as butterflies, dragonflies and birds," said Watts.

Watts installed a rain garden for Vickie and Greg Padgitt who moved from a one-acre wooded lot to a smaller one in the Highlands of Seminole.

"We wanted to add an interesting area in our yard for our two boys to enjoy," Vickie said. "Our rain garden includes a swale that becomes a stream when it rains, and there is a little bridge over the stream." A built-in sandbox,

tiered rocks, and a bird feeder compliment the gardens design.

Contrary to popular belief, rain gardens do not attract mosquitoes. "Standing water will not remain in a properly installed rain garden for more than 36 hours," he said.

Constructing a rain garden includes excavating and modifying the soil with a free-draining material such as sand, and puncturing holes in the clay layer. The holes are then filled with draining material. "It is important to break through the clay layer so water can return to the water table," Watts said. He cautioned that the depression (the rain garden) is not simply a low area, but must be excavated.

Once the depression is prepared, the fun begins. "The focus is on flowers," said Watts, "A rain garden is a garden, not a prairie, although some grasses can be used. Sedges offer a variety of heights, and they look more maintained because their fine texture gives a more manicured

design."

"I consider rain gardens to be a new design paradigm. Design, as a component, is in its infancy. A rain garden can make an aesthetic statement. There can be upper edges and side slopes. It can have a Victorian sunken look. You can build a small wall around the garden instead of using scattered boulders," Watts said.

"There are a number of opportunities for layout, and we match aesthetics to a client's taste. We are limited only by the clients desires and the landscapers creativity."

"There are many ways to design a rain garden. There's no standard way," said Watts. But one thing is sure, rain gardens represent a way households can improve water quality in a community.

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