

Her name is

Her name is “*Rain Garden*”

Amanda Kollar is a landscape designer with Gardens, Inc. and a member of the University of Florida IFAS Leon County Extension Advisory Committee. Nancy Miller is the project coordinator for the TAPP (Think About Personal Pollution) campaign of the Ochlocknee River Soil & Water Conservation District. For more local gardening information, visit the UF-IFAS Extension website for Leon County at <http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu>

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Most every homeowner, at one point or another, has been stumped about what to do with excess water washing across their yard during and after a rainstorm. Many times the water puddles and sits or rushes off so fast that it carries the soil away with it. In the past, designers and contractors have dealt with a lot of these water issues by suggesting that the homeowner “just get the water off their property as quickly as possible” and sometimes without much regard for down hill neighbors. I am excited to tell you about a relatively new concept that can address some of these issues without fancy and expensive drainage systems and can be a joy to create with friends and family.

Please, allow me to introduce you to the “Rain Garden”.

A rain garden is a functional garden with a special purpose; to catch and filter rain water that originates on our properties in order to reduce the amount of stormwater run-off entering our rivers, lakes and streams.

In a perfect world, rain would hit the ground, percolate into the soil and be filtered by plant roots and untainted soil on its way to the aquifer. In reality, rain falls on impervious surfaces (roofs, driveways, etc.), picks up speed, and can flow for miles gathering all kinds of pollutants including fertilizers, pesticides, spilled gas and oil on its way to our surface waters (lakes, rivers, streams, creeks, etc.).

Rain gardens are basically man-made shallow depressions specifically designed and strategically placed in order to catch rainwater coming off our roofs and/or driveways. It should capture and hold excess water for a couple of hours to a day allowing it to soak into the soil therefore keeping it from creating more trouble further down slope. The garden is planted with native vegetation that can handle standing water for a short period and after becoming established, will perform without fertilization.

The first rain gardens were our native ecosystems. Before our lands were settled, rain was filtered through soils and roots of native plants in our forests, wetlands and meadows. The surface water that entered our ground water was much cleaner. When European settlers cleared the land and built communities, much of the natural water-cleaning systems were lost and are continuing to be removed today as a result of urban growth. Rain gardens mimic the function of these natural filtering systems that development continues to destroy.

As towns grow into cities with more and more impervious surfaces (roofs, driveways, lawns, etc.), the water that once filtered down to underground water supplies now runs off into the nearest storm drain. Water managers are concerned about replenishment of underground supplies and treatment of stormwater runoff.

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Rain gardens are becoming popular because they provide homeowners an opportunity to help solve some of these issues, in addition to having an attractive garden that is virtually maintenance free.

The idea of a rain garden, or bio-retention system, first originated in 1990 in Prince George's County, Maryland by Larry Coffman, head of the county's environmental programs. He was investigating cost effective and lower maintenance methods to improve infiltration systems and the water quality in stormwater treatment facilities. Since that time, a number of people, municipalities and organizations have influenced and enhanced the rain garden movement in the United States .

How Do Rain Gardens Work?

Rainwater from the roof, driveway and lawn is channeled into a low or excavated area of the yard where the rain garden is located. A healthy rain garden has native material planted in loose soil which creates a dynamic system teeming with life where water is filtered into the soil or absorbed by the plants. Natural chemical and biological processes break down pollutants over time. A well-placed, carefully designed rain garden can capture virtually all of the runoff from the property in all but the heaviest storms. Instead of washing your soil and fertilizers off to the nearest stream or lake, the water is utilized in an attractive garden which enhances the beauty of your yard while protecting your water.

Rain Gardens ...

- Capture the water and increase the amount of water that filters into the soil.
- Limit the water flow helping to reduce flooding and drainage problems in the community.
- Capture and breakdown lawn fertilizers, pesticides and other substances instead of enabling the water to run off into nearby lakes and streams.
- Slow the water flow helping to prevent soil erosion.
- Enhance your yard with beautiful, blooming, native, low-maintenance plants.
- Attract birds, butterflies and other wildlife.

Thinking about the state of our environment, at times, can be daunting. In order to feel like I am helping to create a better world, I have to begin with my world. Creating a sanctuary in my yard and doing it in a way that is natural and pleasing to wildlife visitors is satisfying and a lot of fun for me and my family. Part Two of this series on Rain Gardens will be a "how-to" on creating one for you and your family. I hope in doing so you will have the same sense of satisfaction.

Happy gardening!

For more information on rain gardens you can go to raingardens.org or tappwater.org.

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