

Creating a Fall Rain Garden

A rain garden is a shallow landscaped area that collects, absorbs, and filters stormwater runoff from rooftops, driveways, patios and other hard surfaces that don't allow water to soak in. Rain gardens are an attractive way to control stormwater runoff and can be shaped and sized to fit any yard. Rain gardens are different than traditional planting beds because they form a shallow depression where stormwater can sit until it sinks into the ground. For a rain garden to manage storm runoff efficiently, plan for these three key elements:

Soils and Drainage

Plants will thrive and water will soak into the ground when the soil conditions are right, so it's important to make sure a rain garden can work for the location you've selected. You can amend your soil with compost to help the plants grow, but you also need to check the drainage underneath your rain garden.

Dig a test hole about 2 feet deep and 1 - 2 feet in diameter where you'd like to put your rain garden. As you dig, take some moist soil and form it into a ball:

- If the soil falls apart or can be broken up easily and feels gritty, this is probably a sandier, well-draining soil.
- If the soil is smooth but not sticky, then it is likely a silty soil which will drain moderately well.
- If the soil is sticky, smooth, and can be worked like modeling clay, this suggests a poor-draining soil with higher clay content, and would not be a good location for a rain garden.

Check the drainage by filling the hole with 6 to 12 inches of water. Stand a yard stick or a pipe with markings every half inch in the hole and time how long it takes for the water to drain out completely. If 6 inches of water in the hole is gone in 24 hours or less, this is a good location to install your rain garden.

Adding compost to your soil is a good idea to help the plants thrive. Contact your local landscape and compost suppliers for options to improve the quality of your soil. Free soil testing through the King Conservation District can help you decide what kind of amendments you may need. Follow the link below for more information.



Size and Location

A rain garden can improve the appearance of your home in addition to helping manage stormwater. Rain gardens can serve as an attractive visual buffer from roads or neighboring homes. Always make sure your rain garden has an overflow that directs water safely to the storm drain or disperses it into the landscape.

Sizing your rain garden depends on the area you want to drain to it (such as your roof and driveway) and how well the soils absorb water. For a typical single family house and driveway with moderately well-draining soils, the rain garden should measure about 12 feet by 20 feet. For more information on sizing rain gardens, explore some of the online resources below.

It's also important to consider areas where your rain garden shouldn't go. Avoid placing your rain garden near steep slopes, in very flat or low areas that don't drain well, or over existing utilities. Before you dig be sure to call 811 for public utilities located in the right-of-way, and your private utility providers like the cable company, to have existing utilities located. Also

avoid placing a rain garden within 10 feet of a building foundation, or within 100 feet of drinking water wells or septic drain fields or tanks.

Plant Selection

It's important to select native, drought resistant plants that will do well in the wet, cold winters and dry summers of the Northwest. You will also want to think about the maintenance of each plant you choose; fast growing or large plants may require more pruning, and if planting near a road or driveway make sure the mature plants won't block drivers' vision.

There are many resources for rain garden plant selection, as well as designing and installing your rain garden. Local nurseries can give advice on plants that thrive in the Northwest and are appropriate for rain gardens. The Rain Garden Handbook for Western Washington, available as a free download at the WSU Extension Rain Garden webpage below, contains a list of plants and design guidance to help you decide which plants you'd like to use. We will also explore rain garden plant options and preparing for fall planting in the next issue of Auburn Magazine.



Rain Garden Resources

Check out these resources for sizing your rain garden, selecting plants and more:

- **King Conservation District Soil Testing Program:** free soil analysis for residents of King County - <http://kingcd.org/programs-farm-management-soil-testing.htm>
- **12,000 Rain Gardens:** Resources for designing your rain garden and more <http://www.12000raingardens.org/>
- **WSU Extension Rain Garden:** Free pdf Rain Garden Handbook for Western Washington - <http://ext100.wsu.edu/raingarden/>