

The Rain Garden

A tale of improving one's own gardening experience and also increasing water quality and biodiversity for a whole community.

Diane had earned many titles in her neighborhood over the years, from "Sam's mom" to "the woman organizing the garage sale" and, lately she had become known as 'the woman digging the ditch.' The small children of the neighborhood had told her this. To them, she was "the lady with the flowers." And to one boy who had been there on the day she began the "ditch," she was the lady with the salamander.

The salamander had prompted the digging. She'd never seen one before that day. It had startled her, as small creatures that blend with the soil do, moving suddenly beneath your fingertips.

Recovering, she'd wondered aloud, "Who are you?" And changed her angle to see better.

Then, she was surprised she could have missed it. It was so much darker than the earth it lay on. And it had yellow spots. It seemed, after its skittering quick retreat to be looking at her, waiting.

She reached with a gloved hand to gently draw it toward her.

That's when six year old Micky appeared, startling her almost to dropping her catch. "What is it?" He piped.

She showed him and they looked in her books together to learn what it was.

"They live in damp woods, Micky," she summarized. "This *was* a woods before our houses were built."

She looked out the window. Toward that tiny remnant of woods. Which she had been planning to clean up and garden.

Thus the rain garden idea was born. What she had been digging all spring were not ditches but depressed channels beginning at downspouts then joining, sloping and widening toward the wet area. She disconnected the downspouts from plastic drain tiles that had emptied into the storm drain. Now, rain from the roof coursed along the route she'd chosen and settled into that low space.

She'd planted tiny divisions of wetland plants there, and retained the edge of the sunken area with rough cedar logs and fieldstone.

Salamanders, Diane knew, aren't the only fascinating things that thrive in damp woods. Those moist depressions are habitat for many wildflowers and shrubs. Diane's planned her rain garden to be full of those plants -- a beautiful sight for her, a haven for salamanders and a place where healthy roots and rich soil will filter groundwater before it returns to the drinking water supply.

What are rain gardens?

Standard building practice has been to grade properties toward streets, packing the surface soil so rainwater runs off the lawn, along paved surfaces and into storm drains. A great deal of pollutants run with it. City planners are trying now to correct this problem by advocating the use of rain gardens -- wide, shallow depressions that are natural water filters where water can slow and be absorbed.

Why build a rain garden?

How does one build a rain garden?

Placing the rain garden

- 30' from house

- Best in sun, not under trees

- Better on level or very gentle grade than steeper slope

- Long side should lay across slope to intercept maximum water

Sizing the rain garden

- 4 - 8" deep and level as possible. Deeper in heavier soils

- Use soil from excavation to berm sides and lower end

- Figure roof area, garden can be 25% of roof & lawn drained

- Or figure inches of rain on roof & lawn drained

Make sure water is directed into it

Wisconsin DNR manual

<http://clean-water.uwex.edu/pubs/pdf/rgmanual.pdf>

more with plant chart by plant type:

<https://dnr.wi.gov/wnrmag/html/stories/2008/apr08/raingarden.htm>

Examples of rain gardens you can build