

Rain Gardens: A Homegrown Way to Slow the Flow

Heavy rainstorms can create a myriad of issues for the community including basement flooding, standing water that attracts mosquitoes, and dumping large quantities of runoff into our lakes, rivers, and streams. As the City of Ashland further develops, the amount of impervious surface will likely continue to increase, runoff from which contains pollutants and other materials that are detrimental to the water sources they flow into. Rain gardens are one of the fastest growing elements of home-landscaping (UW-Madison), supported by entities including the Wisconsin DNR, EPA, USGS, and UW-Madison for their effectiveness in capturing rainwater, filtering pollutants, and adding clean water to groundwater sources. From a community standpoint, rain gardens provide a relatively inexpensive, easily maintained, and aesthetically pleasing option for homeowners to do their part to “slow the flow” and promote local water quality.

Rain gardens are depressed areas vegetated with perennial plants which can capture and filter runoff before it enters our surface or groundwater sources. The clay soil that characterizes most of Ashland does *not* prevent rain gardens from functioning properly, but makes sizing and planting particularly important to consider. Determining the necessary size for a rain garden can easily be calculated online through organizations such as The Rain Garden Alliance. Native plants are highly recommended for all rain gardens, particularly those located on clay soils. Native species’ root systems are better adapted to penetrate thick clay, and can also attract wildlife such as butterflies and birds (guides for selecting your plants can be found through Bayfield Regional Conservancy). Once planted, rain gardens require weeding in the first year or two to ensure that desired plants become established and crowd out unwanted additions.

While water quality can be improved through an overall increase of rain gardens in the city, there are several other common community issues that they can be used to address. A major advantage is that rain gardens can significantly reduce flooding and drainage issues in neighborhoods without burdening municipal sewage systems. Additionally, rain gardens take between 2-3 days to completely drain in clay soil, preventing mosquitoes from breeding (requiring at least 7 days) or other consequences of standing water after large storm events. The flexibility of rain garden design allows the property owner to install plants that are attractive to them, creating the opportunity for neighborhood beautification in the process. For more information about rain gardens contact City of Ashland Planning & Development at 715-682-7583 or sustainability@coawi.org.