

The beauty of rain gardens

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By Donna L. Cole

Waterfront Living Maryland

It seems like such a simple idea - take the stormwater that runs off the roof or in your driveway, direct it towards a beautiful garden and in the process, do the Chesapeake a huge favor. The question is, if it's really this simple, why wouldn't everyone have a rain garden?

"Anybody can put one in and everybody should," says Dennis Skaggs, owner of Annapolis-based Severn Grove Ecological Design.

What is a rain garden?

The vast majority of our roofs are impervious surfaces, meaning the rain water flows off the roof with no where to go - except the Chesapeake Bay.

"It really messes everything up," explains Skaggs. "When you move water quickly out of an area, it picks up solvents, oils, pesticides, fertilizers - anything you can think of - and dumps it into the bay. These rain gardens eliminate that - basically putting back a natural, filtered system."

"It's all about getting the water back into the ground rather than letting the water run directly into the bay," says Skaggs. "A rain garden is a relatively sophisticated style for storm water management - it's sophisticated and it's not."

Some people equate rain gardens with rain barrels, which isn't necessarily the case. A rain garden utilizes stormwater runoff and directs it toward a useful purpose. A rain barrel is used for harvesting rain water, which then can be used in a number of ways, including watering of rain gardens.

"It's nice to combine the two if you can, but just having a rain garden is still great," says Rob Schnabel, restoration scientist for the Chesapeake Bay Foundation.

According to Schnabel, who has rain barrels and a rain garden at his house, "It's one of the things individuals can do at their own homes" that is "extremely helpful" to the bay.

"It helps in many ways," he says. "It helps beautify your yard and helps control runoff from rain events, clean the water and what's also great is you build a wildlife habitat - a butterfly habitat."

Options/cost

There are a few options with rain gardens that range in complexity and cost.

Starting with the larger ones, if you think a rain garden has to be located near gutters, think again. Utilizing pipe, which runs off the gutter and goes underground, the only limit to where the rain garden is located is imposed by the homeowner.

"They can be a mile away," explains Skaggs. "I can run that pipe all day long if I want to."

With plants added into the cost, the sky is the limit.

"It's probably anywhere from \$2,000 on up," he says.

The plants are environmentally friendly too.

"These are specific," Skaggs says. "They are native to the area, they are drought-tolerant, they can handle everything - not any old plant will hold up to those kind of conditions."

Recommended varieties include wax myrtle, sweet bay magnolia, button bush and lots of perennials.

"We pack them with perennials," Skaggs says.

You're not limited to small plants either. Trees such as bald cypress and river birch are great for water gardens.

There also are specific plants that will attract visitors.

Swamp milkweed, according to Skaggs, is the "host plant for the monarch butterfly" and cardinal flower is "a big hummingbird attractant."

Debbie Fitzgerald of Severna Park had six rain gardens installed on her waterfront property by Skaggs.

"I love them because they do their work and that makes them self-watering, which is a lovely thing," she said. "They look very natural, they virtually need no maintenance, there's a great variety of plants and they attract lots of wildlife."

Ms. Fitzgerald's gardens were not a little undertaking.

"We think it may be the largest residential rain garden in Anne Arundel County," says Skaggs. "We haven't been contested, so we'll say it is."

Doing it yourself

Don't let size fool you - even a small rain garden is better than no rain garden.

If think you can handle building your own rain garden, there's an abundance of resources available on the Internet.

If interested in adding the rain barrel component, Arlington Echo Outdoor Education Center, a division of Anne Arundel County Public Schools, sells barrels, with all proceeds going to restoration projects and other student-involved environmental activities.

The Green Building Institute in Jessup periodically offers courses in how to build rain gardens.

The Chesapeake Bay Foundation, as well as a number of other organizations, offers do-it-yourself rain garden manuals, which look fairly simply and straight forward - some are written specifically for children.

Tax credits / grants

Up to \$10,000 in tax credits are available to homeowners in Anne Arundel County who take action to correct the stormwater issues on their properties.

Larry Tom, Anne Arundel County director of planning and zoning, says it all starts with a letter to his office.

"We have a fairly simple practice to apply for this credit," he says. "We have a list of acceptable practices for the cost of installation and materials."

Queen Anne's County does not offer a tax-credit program.

The Chesapeake Bay Trust and other agencies provide grants to communities and watershed groups for rain gardens.

"I got a grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and the Chesapeake Bay Trust to put in a rain garden at Westfield Shoppingtown (Annapolis)," says Edgewater environmentalist Anne Pearson.

This is just one of many area locations Ms. Pearson has installed rain gardens.

Why doesn't everyone have a rain garden?

"We've done quite a few of them," says Skaggs. "We're up to eight or so, which is pretty good, considering no one knows what they are."

Kara Bowne-Crissey, owner of Good Earth Gardeners in Annapolis, who designed Ms. Fitzgerald's rain garden, concurs with Skaggs.

"I would love to do more - we're just getting to the point people are asking about them and getting to know them," she said.

(Donna L. Cole is a freelance writer living in Annapolis.)

SOURCES:

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INTERNET SOURCES:

Chesapeake Bay Foundation

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Arlington Echo Outdoor Education Center

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Green Building Institute

<http://www.greenbuildinginstitute.org>

South River Federation

<http://www.southernriverfederation.net/RainBarrellMainPage.php>

Queen Anne's County - comprehensive Rain Garden guide and further links

<http://www.qac.org/depts/dpw>

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