



Creating a rain garden for beauty and function

By Zinta Aistars

We live in a sloped and graded world. Rooftops on houses are pitched, sidewalks are sloped, while landscaping is graded to allow rainwater to follow gravity away from building foundations. No one wants a leaky basement or a mushy lawn. In the minds of builders and engineers, all that sloping and grading made sense.

In recent years, homeowners and builders are taking another look at what happens to rainwater runoff.

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, as much as 70 percent of all water pollution is caused by rainwater runoff. The water that runs off rooftops and lawns carries sediment, oils, road salt, trash, bacteria, along with pesticides sprayed on lawns and various toxic chemicals from building materials and automobiles, and even heat.

“Runoff can create flooding, and it adds pollutants to our streams and lakes and eventually larger bodies of water,” says Dave Wendling, president of the nonprofit organization, the Kalamazoo Area Chapter of Wild Ones (KAWO). KAWO is part of a national movement for natural landscaping using native plants.

Rain gardens, Wendling says, can be an easy and attractive solution to rainwater runoff. A retired physician, Wendling lives on 15 acres near Texas Township, where he grows native plants—plants that grew in the area prior to European settlement—and maintains a rain garden.

“A rain garden can be as meticulous or as casual as you like,” he says. “Look for a natural low spot in your yard, maybe an area leading from your down spout, where water naturally tends to pool.”

Rain gardens, he explains, are shallow depressions surrounded by a berm with loose soil and plants, preferably native, which collect and help water to soak into the ground rather than run off. The soil works as a filter that cleans harmful sediment from the water as it seeps into the ground.

Nicole Craig, a consultant for Kalamazoo County Drain Commissioner Pat Crowley, has been working with the commissioner’s office for several years. “We’re interested in promoting ways to capture and clean rain and stormwater in Kalamazoo,” she says. “It’s much more economical to prevent

the problems caused by runoff than to try to repair the damage to water systems later.”

Rain gardens, Craig says, are an excellent way to prevent that kind of damage. The Drain Commissioner’s office, along with Kalamazoo County Land Bank Authority, Kalamazoo County Foundation, and several other area organizations and landscaping businesses, have been working across the county to help homeowners and businesses construct rain gardens.

“Our goal is to make it as easy as possible for people to build rain gardens,” says Craig. For the most part, she says, “there are no zoning issues in the Kalamazoo city code on constructing these gardens, as long as you keep them about 10 feet away from your foundation and consider underground utilities wherever you dig. If you want to plant on that portion of turf between the sidewalk and the street, however, a permit may be required. Check with the Kalamazoo County Road Commission or whoever owns that curb lawn.”



Photo courtesy of Ruth Caputo

Welcome Home • Summer 2014 • 13



with a native grass mix. Native plants are always best, because they have a longer root system that helps water drain into the soil. They also resist drought and other climate changes.”

Caputo welcomes questions about building rain gardens at info@kalamazoowildones.org.

Actual installation of a rain garden need not take long, says Kelly Jordan, landscape designer at Murray Landscaping. Most requests for these gardens come from residential areas where houses are built close together and puddles develop between houses.

“Evaluate the area where you want your garden,” says Jordan. “You will want to plant different kinds of plants for sunny or shady areas. You’ll want to determine how fast the area drains, how long it will hold water—the soil type—and gauge its slope. If you mostly just want it to be functional, you can place stones and a tree in that area. If beauty is your goal, you can fill it with flowers and ferns.”

The typical rain garden, Jordan says, spans about 10 feet by 20 feet and is between 4 to 8 inches deep. A rain garden in sandy soils should be approximately 20 percent of the size of the drainage area, 30 percent for silty or loamy soils, and 60 percent in clay soils.

Ruth Caputo, a retired chemist, a master gardener and chair of KAWO, lives in a high-end Portage development. While she needed to fill out a couple of applications with the city government for her rain garden in a yard of wood and grassland, her neighbors have been pleased with the results.

“There’s a cultural shift in how people are seeing yards,” she says. They appreciate the added benefit of the birds and butterflies attracted to the garden.

“Before I put in the rain garden, water gathered there naturally,” she says. “I planted native shrubs around the area



Photo courtesy of Ruth Caputo

Helpful links to learn more about rain gardens:

Kalamazoo County Drain Commissioner’s Office
<http://www.kalcounty.com/Drain>

Kalamazoo Area Chapter of Wild Ones
<http://www.kalamazoowildones.org/>

