

The Mercury News

Creating rain gardens for pleasure and practicality

Creating water catchment areas help with pollution and runoff, plus look pretty.



Dan Honda/Bay Area News Group

A landscaped traffic in Piedmont features a rain garden where water is captured and allowed to drain slowly into the soil instead of running off into the street.

By **JOAN MORRIS** | jmorris@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group

PUBLISHED: September 28, 2016 at 2:14 pm | UPDATED: February 24, 2017 at 3:33 pm

Many cities are now requiring builders to create water catchment systems to prevent erosion and improve water quality. One way for the homeowner to do this is to build rain gardens on their property.

Roxy Wolosenko, a Bay Area landscape designer and contractor, outlined both the benefits of rain gardens and the steps for constructing one. Here are her tips:

ADVERTISING

- Most older homes have rain gutters that direct water off the roof and onto the landscaping, where more often than not it runs into the street and down storm drains. The

problem, says Wolosenko, is that storm drains can become overwhelmed by the volume of water, and the water itself picks up toxins from the roof, landscape and street, killing and sickening wildlife.

- Rain gardens provide a place for the water to go and slowly percolate into the ground. The soil will help filter out any pollutants and the gardens provide places for us to grow native plants that prefer our winter rains.
- Before digging your rain garden, determine the percolation rate of your landscape by digging a hole and filling it with water. If it takes longer than a day and a half to drain, you'll want to import better-draining soil for your garden. You don't want to create a pond or have standing water where mosquitoes can breed.
- Place your rain garden at least 10 feet from the house, and provide an overflow area that also is away from your house.
- Rain gardens should be at least 100 square feet. You can build one too small, Wolosenko says, but you can't build it too large.
- Use trenches or underground pipes to direct the water from the gutters to the rain garden.
- The bottom of the rain garden should be flat and the sides sloped. You can plant in both areas.
- Depending on your site, you want your rain garden to be at least 4 to 6 inches deep. If you have the space, you can create a series of rain gardens.
- You'll need to create solid berms, like levees, around the rain garden to hold in the water.
- For best results, put the rain garden in a sunny spot.
- If you have heavy clay in your yard you may need to dig some out and replace the soil with a mixture of 60 percent sand, 20 percent compost and 20 percent top soil.
- Don't use all sand, Wolosenko says. That will make the water drain too quickly, and the idea is to have it slowly dissipate. And don't mix sand in with your native clay soil. That, she says, will make concrete.
- You can put gravel on the bottom of the garden to increase percolation.
- Most rain gardens are built in an organic shape.
- Although our winter rains, which we're hoping will return again this season, will provide enough water for our natives for several months, new plantings will need some supplemental water in the summer until the plants are established — about two to three years. Wolosenko recommends installing an irrigation system in the garden, either drip or over sprinklers. Even though you'll be doing supplemental watering, you won't be doing much as most natives don't really like or need summer water.
- Mulch your garden with an organic mulch, such as wood chips. In the wetter conditions, the mulch will break down much faster. Just reconcile yourself, Wolosenko says, to adding mulch every year.

• **Related Articles**

- **Fall is perfect time for planting**
- **Grow your garden by growing your soil**
- **Finding harmony in the garden**

You'll likely also have more weeds as you are creating a fertile growing place. Wolosenko uses filter fabric as a weed block, spreading it on top of the garden and cutting planting holes in the fabric, which allows the water to penetrate.

- If you plant trees on the slopes of your rain garden, they'll need a little extra support as planting on a slope can make them lean.
- As plants die, replace them. The more roots you have, the better your soil will drain.

Alternatives

- If you don't have room for a rain garden, look at other ways of retaining water on your property, without creating ponds.
- Wolosenko recommends using water retention blocks, which resemble milk crates but with fair more and varied holes. The blocks are extremely sturdy, able to support up to 25,000 pounds.
- Dig a hole in your backyard big enough to hold one of the blocks. Cover the block in filter fabric and put it into the hole, then cover it. The block will slow the water, allowing it to drain into the soil.
- Some people are using the blocks to convert their swimming pools into cisterns. The blocks hold the water in the pool and landscaping over them keeps the water safely underground. You can hook a pump to the system and use the stored water on your landscape.
- Water retention blocks are commonly used in new construction and landscaping, and are available at commercial irrigation stores.

ABOUT OUR GARDEN

Our Garden offers free classes at 10 a.m. every Wednesday from April through October. Master Gardeners are available to answer questions and a large selection of seedling are available. All produce grown at the garden is donated to the Monument Crisis Center in Concord. The garden is at Wiget Lane and Shadelands Drive, Walnut Creek.

Come take a free class

- Oct. 5: Growing cover crops, Master Gardener Janet Miller
- Oct. 12: Growing citrus and avocados, Ed Laivo of Four Winds Nursery
- Oct. 19: Growing roses from seed, horticulturist Kathy Echols
- Oct. 26: Fall and winter care of fruit trees, Janet Caprile UC Cooperative Extension farm advisor