One week, six rain gardens

A neighborhood building project beautifies the streetscape and keeps pollutants out of local waterways  By JEANNE HUBER + Photographs by WILLIAM WRIGHT

On a sunny day last September, dozens of neighbors in the western Washington town of Puyallup were out in their front yards, elbow-deep in dirt. They were planting a half-dozen saucer-shaped beds, the finale to a weeklong building blitz to turn two 18th Street blocks into a rain-garden demonstration project.

By ushering storm runoff into the soil, rather than letting it flow down oily streets, the new planting beds would protect one of the community’s greatest assets, Clarks Creek, where five species of salmon lay their eggs. The gardens would also make the neighborhood more beautiful and attract birds and butterflies. As a bonus, the city was picking up the tab for the work, since it would serve as a teaching tool to encourage similar installations in the area. The neighbors just had to help plant, and promise to care for, the new gardens. “It was a fabulous opportunity, too good to pass up,” said Heidi Eshpeter, one of the neighborhood organizers. “When

community plant-a-thon

During one weekend last September, dozens of neighbors, including Heidi Eshpeter (TOP, left) and Paula Hemphill (right), got together to plant six rain gardens that had been dug and filled with soil earlier in the week. Creating a series of these bowl-shaped planting beds helps keep municipal storm drains from becoming overwhelmed and filters out pollutants that otherwise wash into natural waterways.
you live near a salmon stream, everybody needs to do their part.”

Of course, rain gardens aren’t just for those with well-known fish-spawning grounds nearby. They are helping turn storm-water problems into landscaping amenities all across the country—filtering out pollutants and keeping them from washing into waterways, and allowing rain to percolate back into the soil, where it can replenish the water table. In dry desert areas and in city gardens with shallow soil, they make the most of every rainfall.

Homeowners don’t usually have the luxury of getting free rain gardens, of course. But teaming up with neighbors to put in a half-dozen or more at once is still a great idea. It multiplies the environmental benefits, reduces the work, and saves money. Neighbors can pool orders for plants and compost and share the cost of bringing in a crew with an earth-moving machine.

Rain gardens vary in their final look, though not their basics. There is always an inlet, usually a pipe carrying downspout water, or sometimes a surface channel to direct runoff from a driveway or lawn. The garden bed

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**how a rain garden works**

While they may seem just like pretty little front-yard flower beds, rain gardens function like mini forests by soaking up and filtering rainwater runoff, usually from a downspout, before it runs down oily streets and reaches natural waterways. Because details about size, soil mixture, and plants depend on local conditions, university extension programs are developing tailored advice for many regions. But here are the key components.

- **inlet**: Roof runoff is channeled into a buried pipe that carries water into the rain garden.
- **ponding depth**: The saucer-shaped basin is designed to hold 6 to 12 inches of rainwater during a storm.
- **overflow**: A gravel-filled trench collects and discharges water, should the garden overfill.
- **mulch**: A 3- to 4-inch-thick layer of mulch helps trap moisture.
- **soft soil mix**: A blend of compost and native soil (or sand) absorbs and filters runoff.
three rain gardens, three looks

Garden designer Marilyn Jacobs tailored each of these rain gardens to the homeowners’ wants and needs. They vary from a symmetrical mix of foliage plants and flowers (OPPOSITE, LEFT) to an assortment of low-maintenance ornamental grasses (OPPOSITE, RIGHT) to a bed overflowing with bright blooms (ABOVE).

Itself consists of a “fluffy” mixture of compost and soil (sometimes with added sand), shaped on top like a shallow bowl. This gives rainwater a place to pool during a storm. There must also be a rock-lined outlet for overflow. And, finally, there are tough plants. These must tolerate having “wet feet” (submerged roots) during rainy weather, yet they must be able to survive without irrigation in dry spells.

It is the combination of hardy plants and soft soil that allows rain gardens to work their magic, says David Hymel, who coordinated the Puyallup project for Stewardship Partners, a Seattle nonprofit that is trying to build 12,000 rain gardens in the Puget Sound area. “The whole idea is to have the water be absorbed back into the ground and filtered naturally, the way it used to be when the area was still forest,” he says.

Before the 18th Street rain gardens, roof runoff flowed into the street, picking up oil and other pollutants from the pavement before disappearing into a storm drain that flushed directly into the stream. In a storm, it took just minutes for the creek to rise rapidly, causing erosion that covered gravel spawning beds with silt. Now, gutter water is channeled into the rain gardens, where plant roots and the spongy soil absorb the water over the next day or two, and the water trickles into the surrounding earth. It still moves toward the creek, but underground, so it stays clean and cold, keeping the fish happy.

And on top, where people see the results, how did the rain gardens turn out? “Mine does everything I wanted,” Heidi Eshpeter says. “Before, I had standing water in front of my doorway when it rained. Now the downspout water is piped directly into the rain garden.” Her entry remained dry all last winter, one of the wettest on record. Besides that personal benefit, Heidi loves the way her garden is encouraging individuals to make a difference in protecting their environment. Strolling along streets is a popular pastime in Puyallup, and passersby often pause to read signs explaining the rain gardens. Says Heidi, “People will ask, ‘Can we come up and look?’ I say, ‘Sure.’ That’s the whole purpose. It’s great that we can spread the word.”

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