Rain-Friendly Landscaping

Under natural conditions, most rainfall soaks in where it falls and is naturally filtered by plants and soil. Urbanization has led to an increase in impervious surfaces (hard, paved surfaces that water can't soak through). Precipitation runs quickly across these impervious surface and into nearby streams or stormdrains. Along the way, the precipitation, now considered runoff, picks up and carries whatever pollutants it encounters, such as lawn chemicals. There are many simple steps you can take to reduce the amount of water that runs off your property, as well as the amount of pollution it carries. Even if you don't think you live near water, a stormdrain might channel your runoff quickly to a stream. Many of the practices listed below use soil and native plants to naturally absorb and filter runoff. Refer to the Right Plant, Right Place section of this guidebook for more information about native plants.

Buffer Strips

Do you have water on your property — a pond, a stream, wetland, even a channel that only flows after a rain? If so, consider buffer strips to protect these waterways from runoff and erosion. Buffer strips are best planted densely with native plants and can either be herbaceous (grasses and wildflowers) or woody (trees and shrubs). Plants in the buffer soak up water and filter pollutants before the runoff enters the waterway. The deep roots of the plants hold soil in place, stabilizing banks from erosion. The wider the buffer the better, but even a narrow buffer will help protect the waterway. In addition to water quality benefits, the buffer strip will save you from mowing along the waterway and provide habitat for aquatic wildlife. Can' t afford new plants right now? Simply stop mowing the area along the waterway and see what starts to grow.

Image courtesy of Lake Champlain Sea Grant.

Rain Gardens

A rain garden is simply a shallow depression planted with deep-rooted native plants. Water from your property is directed toward the garden where it temporarily collects after a rain storm. Pollutants are filtered naturally as the water soaks into the soil or is absorbed by the plant. Creating a rain garden is not complicated. Place the garden in an area where it can accept runoff from your rooftop, driveway, or lawn. Consider diverting your downspouts or sump pump outlet to the rain garden. Dig a shallow depression with a level base so water can spread out and soak in evenly. A perimeter of turf grass around the rain garden can be maintained as a pre-filter to treat runoff and help prevent soil erosion. If your soil doesn' t drain quickly, consider amending the soil by mixing in sand, gravel, and compost to improve drainage. Select and plant beautiful native plants that are adapted to your soil, moisture, and sun conditions. Spread mulch around the plants to prevent weeds and retain moisture. The rain garden should drain within two days.

Swales

A swale is similar to a rain garden in that it is a shallow depression planted with native plants. However, a swale conveys water from one point to another. Do you have an area of your property where water flows after a storm? Planting this area as a swale can slow the runoff and reduce erosion.

Rain Barrels

A rain barrel is a container used to capture water that runs off your roof so that you can reuse it later. The barrels vary in shape, size, and style, but all contain similar features: a hole at the top to allow water in from your downspout, a screen to keep bugs and debris out of the opening, a spigot to release water from the bottom, and an overflow mechanism to divert extra water away from your foundation. The barrels work best when elevated a few feet to allow pressure for releasing the water. Consider threading a soaker hose through your landscaping to automatically irrigate your plants when the spigot is opened. You can purchase a barrel for about $100 or make your own from a recycled barrel. Be sure to use the water around your property — water your plants or wash the car — so that the barrel is empty to collect the next storm.

Critical Area Plantings

Do you have areas on your property where turf grass just won't grow? Maybe the area is too wet, too dry, too shady, or too steep? Whatever your problem, there are probably native plants adapted to the conditions. For example, if a patch of your property is too low and wet to grow turf grass, consider planting wetland plants. These plants will help to take up the water and may thrive where turf grass did not. Woodland wildflowers might love that shady area under your oak tree. Deep-rooted native plants can stabilize a steep slope, preventing erosion.

Minimize Impervious Surfaces

Minimize the amount of impervious surfaces (hard paved surfaces that water can't soak through) in your property. Thinking of adding a new patio? Consider using brick pavers. Cracks between the bricks allow water to soak into the ground. Time to replace your driveway? There are materials on the market that look just like regular asphalt or concrete, but allow water to soak though. Or, consider gravel instead. For areas that you can't make pervious, such as your rooftop, direct the runoff into a rain garden or area where it can soak in rather than to the road or a storm drain.

Don't Over Water

Remember, water that doesn't soak into the ground or get soaked up by plants can run off of your property carrying pollutants. Refer to the Landscape Water Conservation section of this guidebook for tips on watering efficiently to avoid overwatering and generating runoff.

Reduce Pollutants

Remember that whatever is on your lawn — fertilizer, pesticide, pet waste, yard clippings — can leave your lawn in runoff. The overall goal of the L2L Program is to reduce the amount of pollutants from reaching our waterways. Refer to the Pesticides section of this guidebook for tips on the appropriate use of lawn chemicals.