

Rain Garden

Sherry Sass (7/07)

If you have been to the Santa Cruz County Complex in the past few months, you may have noticed a small enclosure near the front steps where odd little hills and valleys have been sculpted in an area of once-struggling lawn. In the bottom of the valleys (basins), native plants are mostly surviving our broiling fore-summer; some are even flowering. The ones needing the most extra water are closest to the building, where a downspout drains from the roof into the first of the series of basins connected by shallow ditches. This small project, dug and planted by volunteer participants in a water harvesting workshop in May, demonstrates a rain garden that you can create at home.

What is a rain garden? It is land that has been contoured to catch the rain that falls on your property, especially runoff from “impervious” surfaces (those that don’t allow water to go through) such as your roof or driveway. The contoured land steers the harvested water towards plants that can survive on just that extra bit of water, without much or any additional irrigation. This technique is one of several “water harvesting” tools. Water harvesting has been around for as long as people have grown crops, but recently its principles have been refreshed and updated as we are remembering how to live more harmoniously with the natural cycles of the land that sustains us.

Why make a rain garden? First of all, you will save potable (drinkable) water and money—possibly lots of it. About 40% of urban water use is for outdoor use. If you can cut down on that use, your water utility bills will also go down. Of course, it’s good for the whole watershed to reduce “per capita” (per person) potable water use. The less that has to be pumped from our mostly shallow underground aquifers, the more that’s left for the environment—including the river environment—and for our use during prolonged droughts, such as the one we’re currently in.

Second, you can turn what may be erosion problems in your yard into little oases of green. Do unsightly, ever-deepening gullies gush water that pours from your roof in a big storm? Properly shaped “berms and basins” will gently direct that water to where it can do some good, irrigating native plants. And by creating a circuitous route for draining rainwater to take, from one basin to another, you can slow the flow, which reduces the amount of sediment the water can carry, which decreases erosion.

Do puddles in your yard hang around for days after a storm, encouraging mosquitoes? A third benefit of water harvesting is a reduction in long-term puddling problems. The roots of vegetation planted in a basin increases the permeability of surrounding soil—all those tiny living threads create channels through even our tough dirt—so water will soak into the ground much more quickly after a big rain than into unplanted soil.

And don’t forget the benefits native plants can bring to your property: already adapted to our local conditions, they need little care once established. They will provide habitat for our local birds and other wildlife, and will enhance your home in a way that fits into our unique southeastern Arizona setting. You will need to baby your new plants for their first

year with regular supplemental water, but after that, you can usually turn off the tap (except during very hot, dry periods), while enjoying the shade, lushness, and low-maintenance beauty a rain garden can bring to your home.

So by making a rain garden, you can reap lots of benefits. It doesn't have to be a huge project—you can start small and see how your first experiment works in this coming monsoon, then adjust as you need to. It might surprise you to see how much you can learn about your home site, and how much you can do for it with a little thoughtful contouring and planting. All you need is some careful observation of the existing drainage patterns on your lot, a rake, shovel, a little elbow grease, and some native plants suited to your particular conditions of sun, soil, temperature, and expected harvested rainwater amounts.

Check out Brad Lancaster's comprehensive book, "Rainwater Harvesting for Drylands" (you can borrow a copy from FOSCR; just call us at 520-398-8269); or go to www.harvestingrainwater.com for more information on creating a water garden and other water harvesting tools and principles. The City of Tucson also has a great resource, its Water Harvesting Guidance Manual, that can be downloaded from the website <http://dot.tucsonaz.gov/stormwater> . An extensive selection of native plants can be found at Desert Survivors Nursery in Tucson; Terra Flora in Tubac also carries a variety of locally-adapted natives; and if you search in the big box stores, you can find a few native plant species among the pansies and petunias. So have fun in your yard and help our watershed: plant a rain garden!

[Sherry Sass was trained as a biologist, and is currently President of Friends of the Santa Cruz River (FOSCR), a volunteer group dedicated to protecting the flow, water quality, and riparian habitat of the river. Visit www.friendsofsantacruzriver.org for more information.]