Let It Rain

Well-designed rain gardens are not only good for the earth, but good-looking as well

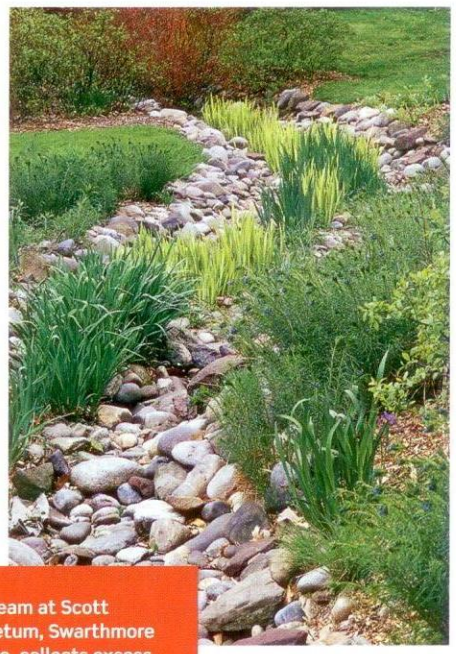
Above: Swaths of pennisetum and other grasses convert a large, shallow-draining swale into a textural garden. Below: Naturalized plantings, here camassia, can make a rain garden fit easily into its surroundings.

CALL IT A BIO-INFILTRATION BASIN OR, MORE romantically, a rain garden. Either way, it's a shallow planted depression designed to hold water until it soaks into the soil—and a key feature of eco-friendly landscape design. Noble idea, yes. Gaining credibility and converts, every day. Good-looking, hardly ever. But there are ways to make a rain garden fit handsomely into a landscape and still fulfill all of its environmental functions.

Nowadays, according to the EPA, approximately half of the rain that falls on

TUSCAN IMPORTS
CLASSIC ITALIAN TERRA COTTA
FROST PROOF
WWW.TUSCANIMPORTS.COM
843.667.9101

Keep them OUT...
Without changing your view.
Benner's
Virtually Invisible
Deer Fencing
Solving the deer problem for thousands from coast to coast since 1992.
www.BennersGardens.com 1-800-BIG-DEER
201 Fayette Street, Conshohocken, PA 19428



Biostream at Scott Arboretum, Swarthmore College, collects excess rainwater, slowly filtering and releasing it into the landscape. Planted with amsonia and *Iris pseudacorus*, which tolerate periodic flooding.

a typical city block heads overland to the nearest pipe, washing along any crud it finds. Historically that water would have infiltrated—soaked in—leaving impurities behind in the soil and plants as it passed through to replenish the water table. Rain gardens are intended to counteract both the unnatural runoff patterns in urban and suburban areas (too many roads, too much paving, too many hard surfaces) as well as the increased crud levels found in them.

Rain gardens can work in most climates, but are most effective in regions with a natural groundwater hydrology—that is, areas with deep soils that drink in water rather than rocky areas that force rain to run overland. Most of the United States is like this. Rain gardens have gained wide residential use in cities as diverse as Kansas City, Minneapolis and Portland, Oregon (the latter two offer utility-bill discounts for rain-garden installation). Entire towns, such as Maplewood, Minnesota, have turned to rain gardens to handle neighborhood storm-water management, plunking little planted basins down between curbs and property lines.

More than a dozen rain-garden designs can easily be found on the Internet (check out raingardens.org or rainkc.com for a few basics). Essentially, you dig a basin, plant some water-tolerant plants, mulch it in well,

TROPICANNA™

Key Features

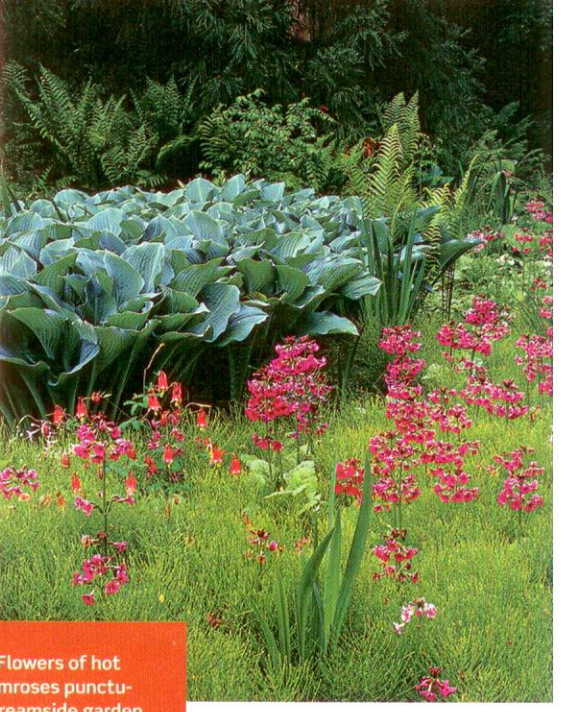
- Fabulous exotic foliage
- Striking blooms
- Brings a tropical touch to the garden
- Ideal for gardens, landscapes and water gardens

Available this spring at your favorite garden center!

ANTHONY TESSELAAR PLANTS Brilliant by Nature

New GOLD

www.tesselaar.com



Above: Flowers of hot pink primroses punctuate a streamside garden at Chanticleer, bringing a pop of color to the varied greens of other moisture-loving plants, such as hostas, iris, ferns and dwarf scouring rush.

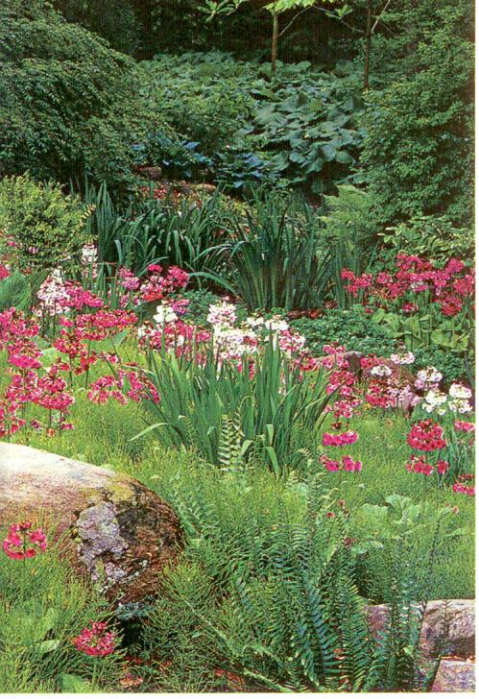
and redirect your downspouts to the hole. The online guides will tell you to locate a rain garden 10 feet from your house and at a natural low spot. That's a good start, but your rain garden runs the risk of just floating out there, awash in lawn and disconnected from your bigger design picture.

"So how can we get away from a rain garden being a kidney shape plopped in the front yard?" asks John Gishnock III. My thoughts exactly, because that result is pretty common. Gishnock is owner of Formecology, a design/build firm specializing in rain gardens and native plants in Wisconsin. He has created rain gardens that are seamlessly incorporated along typical suburban driveway-to-door sidewalks; gardens below dry-laid stone walls adjacent to rustic pathways; and even a garden in the shape of a spiral galaxy (to be viewed from a lucky owner's second-story porch). "A rain garden," says Gishnock, "needs to look like the rest of the landscape."

Landscape architect Jim Hagstrom of Savanna Designs in Lake Elmo, Minnesota, agrees. "We integrate rain gardens into the design," he says, "and two-thirds of the time you won't notice them." His designs depend mostly on his clients' sensibilities. Some love the wild native look of a traditional rain garden, while others favor the idea of infiltration but don't want to see a "patch of weeds." He has incorporated a rain garden into the center of a circle drive and devised a standing stone flow-through curb to match the house. He has created a large basin that infiltrates most

rain garden design tips Rain-garden specialists may cringe, but rain gardens have the potential to be as beautiful as any other garden.

- Think of a rain garden just like a border or foundation planting rather than a beloved specimen tree. In other words, it should not be a stand-alone feature.
- Consider all the rules of composition, screening and circulation—not just the rule that says to put a rain garden in a low spot 10 feet from the house.
- Pick a shape that works with the rest of your garden design. A rain garden does not need a specific shape to function properly so feel free to be creative.
- A rain garden can be as formal or as wild as you like—it's all about the plant selection. Monocultural rain gardens are OK as long as that fits with your overall design. Here are some favorite rain-garden plants: cardinal flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*), blue flag iris (*Iris versicolor* or *I. virginica*), culver's root (*Veronicastrum virginicum*), fox sedge (*Carex vulpinoidea*), red-twig dogwood (*Cornus sericea*), sweet flag (*Acorus gramineus*) and lady fern (*Athyrium filix-femina*).
- A rain garden doesn't have to be separate from other plantings. Consider making a depression within a perennial bed or shrub border (especially if space is tight and you don't have room for a larger rain garden that stands alone).
- Put in more than one rain garden for repetition and continuity. If it works with your overall design, create a little rain garden for each downspout.



water then holds the rest for pond habitat. He has built rain gardens in the centers of lawns, by dishing the landscape and ensuring well-draining soil. "You get a little pond after a rain," he describes, "and in 24 hours it's gone, and you have the lawn back."

Having recently seen some of these well-integrated rain gardens, as well as their plop-art counterparts, I revisited a garden I had a hand in designing at Nicollet Commons Park in Burnsville, Minnesota. I reminisced a little with Geoff Martin, a landscape architect with DSU/Bonestroo in Saint Paul and lead designer of the park. "One of the key objectives of the whole project," says Martin, and by whole project he means far more than just the rain gardens, "was to create a series of complementary spaces." To that end, the intimate rain gardens contrast with the more open, pastoral areas of the site. There was also a desire to connect the performance stage on one side of the largest garden with a promenade on the other—thus transforming that garden into a sunken plaza complete with sitting/stepping stones that also act as a unique depth gauge to show water-level fluctuations.

However they look, rain gardens work, helping to reduce storm-water waste by 99 percent, according to one study, and keeping runoff clean. But they can also be an integrated design element, making landscapes both sustainable and beautiful.—**ADAM REGN ARVIDSON**

Adam Regn Arvidson, ASLA, is a landscape architect and writer who specializes in ecological design and a deep understanding of site.