



A Rain Garden as a Water Feature

by Carol Brinkman, HCMG

Should environmentally concerned gardeners living in a dry climate where drought comes as regularly as the postman consider a water feature? Can a landscape water feature be environmentally friendly? Yes, to both questions if you are thinking rain garden or bioswale.

When it rains, the rain runs to our rivers, lakes, and streams carrying with it the chemicals that are such an accepted part of our daily lives that little thought is given to them — oil from our cars; fertilizers, herbicides and insecticides; pet and livestock wastes; faulty septic systems; the list goes on.

PBS-TV recently aired “Poisoned Waters” in which run-off pollution was cited as a major contributor to water pollution. Billy Kniffen included a reference to rain gardens in his “Rain Water Harvesting” presentation as an example of landscaping that can conserve and protect water resources. Rain gardens address specifically the problem of polluted run-off water. The terms rain garden and bioswale often are used interchangeably. Both refer to depressions or shallow areas (either natural or man-made) designed to correct drainage. The primary difference in the two is the linear, or swale, shape of the bioswale. What makes depression a rain garden is that it is planted with a selection of plants that will slow and filter run-off water before it reaches our water sources. Think of it as taking the “dry creek” a step further by planting in it.

A rain garden can become a beautiful, natural addition to your landscape while providing for wildlife and mitigating the effects of our urban, asphalt, concrete environment. Native plants and ornamental grasses are used because they are proven sustainable.

The preferred plants are those that 1) will slow the run-off so that it can be absorbed and filtered gradually; (2) don't mind having wet feet for a while; (3) can thrive during extended dry spells.

Native ornamental grasses and sedges are important in the design for their ability to produce a strong root mass that will hold the soil and slow the water. As these root systems cycle through decay and rejuvenation, they build up organic matter that works like a sponge to absorb the water and slowly release it to lower soils.

To create a rain garden, study your landscape to observe the run-off patterns. The websites below can help site and size the garden correctly and provide recommendations for digging, shaping, and amending the soil to insure filtration. There are also lists of Texas natives for rain gardens. You, too, can have a colorful and “green” water feature.

[Austin Grow Green – Rain Gardens](#) For a list of recommended plants for central Texas.

[Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center](#) Search “rain gardens” to see all Mr. Smarty Plants answers to rain garden questions.

[Rain Gardens of West Michigan](#) Though this is Michigan site, they offer great information about creating a rain garden.

[The Rain Garden Network](#) This is actually a commercial website, but it, too, offers good information.

[University of Wisconsin Extension](#) A 32-page manual has guidelines, photos and diagrams in pdf format.



Left: Asphalt, etc. from the author's parking area is carried downhill to the street and straight to the Guadalupe River. Center: There's a natural depression where a rain garden could be installed to slow and hold run-off. Right: A beginning rain garden.