

4 Steps to Creating a Successful Rain Garden

Step 1 – Locate and size possible sites

- Determine needed size (see previous page).
- Don't locate over underground utilities or major tree roots. For a free utility location service, call 1-800-424-5555 or see www.callbeforeyoudig.com).
- Don't locate in soggy areas+ (where water won't soak in) or on slopes above 5%. +Don't locate near steep slopes or landslide-prone areas – see “Safety First” on previous page to locate them.
- Set back rain gardens at least 10 feet away from any building. If you or a neighbor have a basement deeper than 5 feet underground, add 2 feet more setback (to that 10 ft. minimum) for each foot the basement extends deeper than 5 feet.
- Determine which roof or driveway areas will flow downhill to your possible rain garden sites (use a board with a level, or set a hose running to see where the water flows). How would you get the water to the rain garden: by pipe, through a rockfilled ditch or shallow grassy swale, or just flowing over your lawn to the rain garden?
- Make sure there's a safe route for the overflow water out of the rain garden in big storms, to street drains.
- Think about where the rain garden would fit and enhance the appearance of your landscape.



Step 2 – Design, excavate, and amend soil in rain garden, then create a safe inflow and overflow

- Lay out a garden hose or string in the shape you want, measure and adjust to get the needed size.
- Determine whether runoff will arrive by pipe, rockfilled ditch, or overland flow.

- Excavate soil 18-30 inches deep (some soil can be used to berm the downhill edge – pack berm tightly).
- Mix about 2/3 soil with 1/3 compost, and replace it loosely in the bottom. Level that compost/soil mix without compacting it, so that the bottom of the rain garden is at least 6 inches, but not more than 12 inches, below the overflow height. This is your “ponding depth” which will hold rain to soak in.
- Create an overflow (see diagram on previous page) at the lowest point along the edge of the rain garden. Armor that overflow area out several feet with rocks, to spread the water’s flow and prevent erosion. Overflow water should run to a street drain, rather than flooding your neighbors’ yards or sidewalks.
- Create an inflow with a pipe or rock-lined ditch from your downspout to the upper edge of the rain garden. Protect that area with rock too.

Step 3 – Plant and mulch

- Choose plants that fit your yard, and fit the conditions.
 - Bottom: plants that like wet conditions.
 - Sides: plants that can stand wet or dry soil.
 - Top edge: drought-tolerant plants.

Consider sunlight, and maintenance needs too. The Rain Garden Handbook and the RainWise website have lists of well adapted plants. Your local nursery is a good place to see plants, and get advice.

*Plant, and water well to establish plants.

*Mulch the bottom of the rain garden with 2 inches of compost (it doesn’t float away easily), and mulch the sides and top with 3-4 inches of arborist wood chips (usually free from a tree trimming company).

Step 4 – Maintain your rain garden

- Water your new plants regularly for the first 1-3 years, until they are well established.
- Replenish mulch layers annually to conserve water and reduce weeds for several years, until the plants close in over the soil.
- Weed in spring, summer, and fall until the plants close in. Don’t use fertilizers or weed killers.
- Keep the inflow and overflow areas free of debris, and well protected with rocks from erosion.
- Follow the links on the RainWise website to learn more about Natural Yard Care.