

Build Your Own Rain Garden

Maintenance

A rain garden is not much different than any flower garden when it comes to maintenance, depending on the types of plants you put into it. Using native plants adapted to your local climate makes maintenance of a rain garden somewhat easier than a typical flower garden. Because native plants are adapted to the growing conditions, animals and insects in an area, they do not need fertilizer and pesticides to survive and look good. In fact, fertilizing natives creates more top growth and less root growth. The roots are what do the work underground to help improve soil infiltration.

Watering and weeding are very important during the first year to establish the new plants. In general, new transplants need about an inch of rainfall or water per week. You will need to water the young plants during dry spells. Take care not to overwater and rot the roots.

During the first year you will need to review your plants and replace where needed. You should evaluate which plants are doing well and which are not. Soil wetness will be the big factor. Your soil may be drier or wetter than anticipated and the plants selected may have responded well or died. Based on your observations you may choose to change plants to better fit the soil conditions.



The photos to the left represent a rain garden after planting was completed.

The photos to the right are the same rain garden one year later.





Maintenance (cont.)

Also, during the first year you will want to monitor how your rain garden is functioning. Most rain gardens will be placed near the house where you can watch it fill up with water. Make sure the water is not backing up too close to the house and the overflow is working properly. Check to see that the ponded water has soaked into the soil within 24 hours. Modifications to the overflow can be made if water depth is not correct.

Remove weeds as soon as possible so they do not have time to get established and produce seed. Maintain a 3" to 4" layer of mulch to suppress weeds. Mulch helps prevent soil erosion and keeps the soil moist which helps new plants get off to a good start and reduces your need to water in the early stages. We recommend using organic mulch, such as shredded wood as opposed to inorganic materials like stone. Organic mulches will enrich and improve the soil as they decompose. Avoid using large-sized mulch (bark chips) which tends to float when it rains.

The first few years, you should inspect your rain garden for signs of erosion. If water is entering the garden in one or more concentrated spots (through a swale or pipe, for example), those areas may need to be reinforced with some stones to buffer and protect the soil, mulch, and plants.

Label your plants when you put them in so you can identify them and differentiate them from weeds the following spring. Labels also help educate others about rain garden plants.

After a couple of growing seasons, your plants should be well established. The maturing native grasses, sedges, rushes, and wildflowers should be thick enough to suppress weeds, but you may have an occasional weed to pull. If you have planted native species, they will be able to handle fluctuations in rainfall; however, you may need to water during longer drought periods.

Dead plant stems and leaves can be cut back in the fall, or left through the winter to provide wildlife cover and seeds. Depending on the plant and the size of your rain garden, you can use pruners, shears, a weed whacker, or mow them down. A hedge trimmer works well on tall grasses. If you leave the dead plant material to decompose in the garden, be sure to chop it up with a lawn mower. Alternatively, add the clippings to your compost pile.

If your rain garden has trees or shrubs, you may need to prune them to remove dead or diseased branches and maintain shape or size. Fallen leaves could be left to mulch the garden (although you may want to run them over with a lawn mower once or they may form a mat), or can be removed for a cleaner appearance. If your rain garden has a drain, be sure to keep it clear of leaves and other plant material. Also, be sure to check it occasionally to be sure rodents have not nested or caused any damage.



Rain Garden during the winter. Photo by Jessica Norcross, Hendricks County Soil & Water Conservation District., 2011