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Rain Gardens – A New Approach
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The old routine of choosing plants based on color and dramatic effect and then applying as much water as needed to get them to thrive, is going the way of the dinosaur. There is a new push towards gardens that make sense where a gardener lives - in our case, gardens that can handle mild, wet winters, and hot, dry summers, with limited addition of water. This is how we can sustain our communities and precious water resources into the future. This is how we can live within our California water budget, whether a drought year or not.

To this end, have you considered creating a rain garden as part of your landscape?

Rain gardens are a relatively new concept, but can work well in California. The concept is that rain diverted during the rainy season is concentrated in one area, where it can soak deep into the ground, providing a significant amount of water for carefully chosen plants in the drier seasons.

Originally, the reason for rain gardens was to reduce runoff, thereby minimizing the chance of downstream floods, and improving water quality.

But as the concept was applied to drier areas like ours, it became clear that rain gardens can also create an easy, water saving garden, if done correctly. What's not to love about that?

The trick is to do it right. Location, size, and plant choice are all critical to the success of a rain garden.

When choosing a site, make sure that it is at least 10 feet from your house. You don't want to undermine your foundation. Make sure that it is not over your septic system, and not in an area that stays wet naturally. You're aiming for a garden where the water soaks in, not a swamp or a mosquito hangout. A site that is flat or easy to make relatively flat is also important. The rain garden does not need to be deep - even a depression of 3-5 inches with a berm along one side is often adequate. If you can site your garden where rain water naturally flows, diverting water to it will be all that much easier.

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Once you have chosen your site, you need to decide how big to make it. Will the water come from your roof and be diverted to your rain garden? A good general size in this case is to make it about 1/3 the size of your roof. That's assuming you have the clayey soils that are so widespread in the Foothills, and which are wonderful at absorbing and holding large amounts of water. You might start small, and then expand next year once you get a feel for how well it is working.

The last but all important piece is careful choice of plants. You want to fill your rain garden with plants that can take it seasonally wet, but can also take it seasonally dry. That is not as impossible as it might sound - many (but certainly not all) of our California native plants are well suited to that situation of contrasts. Drought tolerant plants like California fuschia (*Epilobium canum*), Hollyleaf cherry (*Prunus ilicifolia*), and Blue Elderberry (*Sambucus nigra*) can be placed on the higher berms of the rain garden, since these may not like to be inundated.

Other plants like Blue eyed grass (*Sisyrinchium bellum*), Deer grass (*Muhlenbergia rigens*), Pacific aster (*Symphotrichum chilense*), June grass (*Koeleria macrantha*), and Tufted hair grass (*Deschampsia cespitosa*) are fine with being inundated and can be placed right in the bottom. Poppies (*Eschscholtzia californicum*) and milkweed (*Asclepias* ssp.) can also work. Start them on the slopes of your rain garden and they will naturally populate the spot that is just right for them. All will do better with occasional summer water. A nice layer of mulch will be helpful as well.

With these plants your new rain garden will be a low water use summer garden with greenery and flowers, that also allows large amounts of rainwater to soak into the ground, reducing water needs to zero in winter, spring and fall.

For more information, come to a free Master Gardener class on Rainwater Harvesting and Greywater Reuse on Saturday, February 11, 9:00 a.m. to noon at Government Center - Building C, 2850 Fairlane Court, Placerville.

You can also check the website sponsored by the State Department of Water Resources, <http://www.ecolandscapes.org/riverfriendly/raingardens/raingardens.html> and go to their informative design page.

To visit rain gardens in action, visit the UC Davis Arboretum where there are several rain gardens, or the Elk Grove Rain Garden Plaza. To visit one nearby, our own Native garden at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden (SDG) behind Folsom Lake College in Placerville has a small rain garden. The SDG will reopen to the general public in April.

UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\)621-5512](tel:5306215512). Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news. You can also find us on Facebook.