

LOCAL NEWS



Beauty and then some

Rain gardens are useful tools to environment

Along with their springtime blossoms, rain gardens like the one at the Monmouth County Agricultural Building can recharge groundwater supply, filter pollutants and absorb runoff.

By JOSEPH SAPIA
STAFF WRITER

FREEHOLD TOWNSHIP —

The peanut-shaped depression, connected to the Monmouth County Agricultural Building parking lot via a sloping baffle of large stones, was a blur of activity.

Eight people, a combination of staffers from the local Rutgers University Cooperative Extension of



STAFF PHOTOS: BRADLEY J. PENNER

Above: Bill Sciarappa (left), an agent for the Rutgers University Cooperative Extension of Monmouth County, prepares to plant a blue flag iris, carried into place by Brian Hulme of Middletown. The two were working in a rain garden (being built, top) behind the Monmouth County Agricultural Building in Freehold Township. Below: Master Gardener Nancy Carew of Keyport sets out some flowers in the garden.

fice and county master gardeners, raked, pruned and planted.

"We want color, right in the beginning," said Bill Sciarappa, a county agricultural agent based at the extension office in the building.

Sciarappa and his assistant, Vivian Quinn, debated whether to plant liatris where the stones met the approximately 20-by-60-foot shallow depression. The stones were a drain, directing runoff onto the lower ground.

"If they don't survive, we'll have to do a move," Quinn said.

With more thought, they decided to plant blue flag iris, a more hardy

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— Dennis McNamara, 51, a master gardener from Keyport

plant. The liatris would go behind the blue flag iris.

"A lot of this, you try it," Quinn said. "If it doesn't do well, you try it again. Any garden works that way."

This garden is a "rain garden," a simple, landscaped collection point for rain and snow runoff.

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STAFF PHOTO: BRADLEY J. PENNER

At the Monmouth County Agricultural Building in Freehold Township, (from left) research assistant Brian Hulme of Middletown and volunteer master gardeners Dennis McNamara, both of Keyport, dig holes for a rain garden. The garden is a collection point for stormwater runoff.

Garden

FROM PAGE B1

Think of a backyard ver-

Sciarappa said. "We need homeowner ones.

"We're like the concrete state, here," Sciarappa said. "We're paving it over. We need more open space. Homeowners need to con-

this 2-year-old garden serves as a display for passers-by or visitors to the Agricultural Building. A kiosk provides information — and its roof drains into the rain garden.

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sion of a detention basin, beautified with flowers and shrubs.

The extension is heavily promoting rain gardens. Plant one in the fall, Sciarappa added, and it will be an established blooming garden with the warm weather of spring.

Rain gardens recharge the groundwater supply, used for drinking or irrigation, Sciarappa said. Otherwise, the runoff flows across parking lots, driveways and roads to mix with saltwater — in Monmouth County, directly to the ocean or through the watersheds of the Raritan and Delaware rivers.

"Salt is the worst pollutant," said Sciarappa, noting saltwater cannot be used for drinking or irrigation.

Rain gardens also filter pollutants more effectively than a lawn, whether nutrients from fertilizers and other farm and garden runoff that is absorbed by the vegetation, and absorb 30 percent more water.

"Once it (water) gets in there, it slowly percolates," Quinn said. "The plants take up the pollutants, use up the pollutants."

Mulch shelters organisms, which break down pollutants, along with smothering weeds and absorbing water to prevent erosion, Quinn said.

The baffle slows water flow to prevent erosion and collects sediment, along with collecting litter runoff. On this day, plastic wrapping material was in the stones.

"There's, usually, a lot more, here," Quinn said, speaking of litter in the stone. "People are always picking up."

"If we can intercept 25 percent (of pollutants), we can significantly improve the quality of our water," Sciarappa said.

With development and home projects, soil is being paved over, leaving less area to absorb runoff and, perhaps, causing flooding as the water finds its way to the saltwater.

"We don't have room for all these retention basins,"

sider that."

This rain garden was designed to capture 25,000 to 50,000 gallons of runoff per year, Sciarappa said.

Lastly, rain gardens look nice. This one was an undulating mix of green, purple, blue and white, with the yellow of wild goldenrod in the background.

A backyard rain garden could be built for \$300 to \$3,000, depending on its size, how much digging is involved and what plants are put in, Sciarappa said.

"I'm fascinated with rain gardens," said Dennis McNamara, 51, a master gardener from Keyport assisting at the garden. "This is a nice way to handle the storm water."

McNamara said Keyport is to have a rain garden on the Raritan Bay waterfront.

Another volunteer and master gardener, Gayle Williams, 62, of Long Branch, was involved with building the rain garden in May at her town's high school, from which she retired as a guidance counselor.

"From the looks of it, it's doing very well," Williams said.

Besides doing its job of protecting water resources,

After building this one, according to Quinn, the extension service has been involved with the building of about 30 rain gardens around the county — at Joseph R. Bolger Middle School in Keansburg, Belmar's Silver Lake and the county's Biotechnology High School in Freehold Township, for example. Another 20 or so are in the planning stage, Quinn said.

The plan is to reach 1,000 rain gardens in the county, Sciarappa said.

On this day, those working the garden had a goal. "We're trying to add more color," Quinn said. So, they planted the blue-flag iris, cardinal flower, black-eyed Susan (yellow), echinacea (pink), chelone (pink), and obedient flower (white and purple).

"What we need is a little more evergreen in the background, so, in winter, it doesn't look bleak," Quinn said.

"It looks so good, I can't believe it," Quinn said, as work wrapped up. "Doesn't it look a lot better?"

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information on rain gardens is available from the Rutgers University Cooperative Extension at 4000 Kozloski Road in Freehold Township or 732-431-7260/7261. To reach Bill Sciarappa, e-mail sciarappa@aesop.rutgers.edu. To reach Vivian Quinn, e-mail vquinn@co.monmouth.nj.us.