



Rain Garden Maintenance Guide



Albany County Soil and
Water Conservation District



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Voorheesville, NY 12186



Cornell University
Cooperative Extension
Albany County

In partnership with Cornell Cooperative Extension Albany County

**For more information about rain gardens, or how to
design, construct and maintain one for your own
yard, contact:**

**Albany County Soil and
Water Conservation District
518-765-7923**

www.albanycounty.com/swcd

**Cornell Cooperative Extension Albany County
518-756-3500**

www.ccealbany.com



Caring For Your Rain Garden

First Season

Caring for your garden the first season is critical to its success. The most important tasks during the first year are watering and weeding. Young establishing plants need about an inch of rain-fall or water per week.

Long-term Watering

By the second or third season, your plants should be fairly well established and most of the plants will be able to handle short periods of drought. During longer periods, you may need to water your garden, as you would any other landscape bed. Plants need moisture well into the fall, especially shrubs and trees.



Watering tips:

The best way to water is to use a hose to water around the base of each plant, preferably in the morning. This is a more time-consuming method of watering, but it is best for the plant (keeps foliage dry which helps prevent disease) and for the environment (wastes the least amount of water).

Weeds and Mulch

Plants compete with each other for nutrients, light, water and space. Weeds, when given a chance, will almost always win. If weeds are rampant in your garden, your ornamental plants will suffer and your garden will look messy and unkempt. The easiest solution to control weeds is to maintain a 3 inch layer of mulch. Shredded bark mulch is the best mulch for rain gardens.



Mulching tips:

It is important to use a shredded bark mulch because it will knit together and stay in place when the garden fills with rainfall.

Shredded bark mulch does break down and will need to be replaced every year or two, but as your plants grow and fill in, less mulch will be necessary to keep weeds down.

Fertilizing and Compost

Do not apply fertilizers to your rain garden. The rain garden soil mix provides plenty of nutrients and native plants have been selected for the gardens and no fertilizing is needed.

Compost Tips:

There are a variety of methods that can be used to recycle your yard waste into healthy compost that can be used to add nutrients back into your garden. Albany County SWCD can provide you will information on Vermicomposting utilizing your food waste. Cornell Cooperative Extension can provide assistance with composting information.

Perennial Selection

The perennials selected for your rain garden are native or naturalized varieties that can thrive through wet and dry conditions. They have a natural form, seasonal interest and are deep rooted to perform the uptake of water required in a rain garden.



Perennial choice tips:

Plants for a rain garden should be chosen by the amount of light they will receive (sun vs shade) and their ability to handle the periods of wet and dry they will experience throughout the year. Contact the SWCD or CCE for a recommended list.

Perennial Care

Dividing perennials: As your garden matures, the perennials will grow, fill in and may become crowded. To keep the plants healthy, you may need to remove some plants or divide them. Some species may die out in the middle as they age and dividing will re-invigorate them.



Dividing tips:

Perennials are best divided in the spring before they reach 4 inch height. Dig up the entire plant and use a knife, shovel or ax to break the clump into two or more pieces. Replant the pieces in the bed or elsewhere leaving enough space for them

to grow.

Pinching and deadheading: Pinching and deadheading are not required for your rain garden, but they do benefit some species.

Pinching means to cut back or to pinch young stems a few inches above a leaf or bud. This practice makes the plant bushier, more compact or delays blooming. **Deadheading** means to cut off dead flower heads to increase the duration of bloom time. Cut off the spent flower at the base of the flower stalk, and the plant will put its energy into more flowers instead of seed production.

Removing dead stalks: After perennials die back, dead stalks should be cut and removed from the garden. This can be done in fall or spring. Fall removal is recommended if the plants were diseased or had insects. Spring removal is beneficial to allow the plants to provide winter interest of attractive seed heads and dried foliage, as well as food and shelter for birds.

Perennials and Disease

Most of the plants chosen for your rain garden are fairly disease resistant, but sometimes it is hard to distinguish between disease, nutrient deficiency, and insect damage. Prevention is an important strategy in handling disease.



Disease prevention tips:

1. Remove dead and diseased material from the garden promptly.
2. Keep weeds to a minimum.
3. Minimize plant stress by making sure plants have adequate nutrients and water.
4. Keep foliage dry by watering early in the day without wetting the leaves.

Shrub Selection

Shrubs should be selected for the size of the space to be filled. It is best to plant a variety that naturally fits the height and spread requirements of the space where it is planted rather than force the shape through repeated pruning.



Shrub choice tips: Plants for a rain garden should be chosen by the amount of light they will receive (sun vs shade) and their ability to handle the periods of wet and dry they will experience throughout the year.

Shrub Care

Pruning: The shrubs selected for your rain garden have a natural form and should not require much pruning to maintain. You may however need to occasionally remove dead or diseased branches, crossing or rubbing branches, an odd branch, or just to rejuvenate the shrub.

It is best to let the shrubs grow to their natural height and form, but in some cases pruning is helpful to the health of the plant. The best time to prune most shrubs is early in the spring before the shrub begins growing. To maintain a natural shape, cut the oldest and largest stems back to the ground. Broken, damaged or odd stems should be pruned back to the next growing point (leaf or bud) or to the main stem. Do not shear across the top of the shrub to make it shorter. This practice could harm the health of the plant and cause the bottom to lose foliage.



Pruning tips: Pruning shears and clippers for small stems, or a saw for larger stems should be used in the spring to prune individual stems back to the next growing point (leaf or bud) or to the main stem to maintain a natural shape.

Annual Maintenance Schedule

Tasks for early spring (before new growth is 3 inches high):

Cut and remove dead stalks and seed heads remaining from previous season. Remove sticks and debris. Prune shrubs if necessary (see Shrub Pruning section). Divide and move perennials if they are too crowded (see Perennial Care section). Replenish mulch layer to maintain a 3 inch layer of shredded bark.

Tasks for late spring and summer:

- Remove weeds.
- Water as needed during periods of drought for the first season.
- Mow perimeter as needed – **DO NOT** blow grass clippings into the rain garden

Tasks for Fall:

- Remove weeds and diseased plants.
- Remove excess leaves.
- If fall is dry, continue to water trees and shrubs until the ground begins to freeze (late October).
- These woody plants need moisture entering winter to ensure survival.



Leaf Litter

Leaves are a natural mulch and are good for your rain garden in limited quantities. A 2 inch to 3 inch layer of leaves in the garden is plenty.

Because the rain garden is a depressed garden, it tends to collect leaves and debris and should be cleaned out in the fall and spring. The rain garden should not be used as a place to dump leaves.

Shredded leaves (created by running a lawn mower over 2 inch to 4 inch thick piles) will decompose faster and are better as mulch than whole leaves

Enhancing your Rain Garden

Adding plants: Plants can be added to your rain garden to fill in gaps or to replace some of the original plants in the event of damage or loss. Plant selection should consider mature size (height and spread) of the plant, the sun exposure and the changing conditions (wet to dry) of the rain garden.

Spring bulbs should be planted in the fall and can add a bright splash of color first thing in the growing season. Most bulbs need dry soil so they should be planted in the dry upper zone of the rain garden.

Annuals, planted in late spring or early summer, can add continual summer color to your rain garden, especially during the first two years while the perennials and shrubs are filling out. Keep in mind that most annuals will need some type of fertilizer to thrive in the rain garden.

Perennials can be added at any time to provide additional color and interest.

Shrubs should be selected to fit the space. It is best to plant a variety of shrub that naturally fits the height and spread requirements of the space where it is planted rather than force the shape through repeated pruning. They should also be able to tolerate the amount of sun exposure and the changing conditions (wet to dry) of the rain garden, so use of a natural or organic fertilizer is suggested.

Adding other features

Decorative rock, statues or other landscape features can be added to the rain garden to enhance the appearance, but should be carefully placed to avoid interference with the function of the rain garden.

**Demonstration Rain Garden Locations
In Albany County**

Alumni House, Uptown Campus
SUNY Albany

Cook Park
Village of Colonie

Elm Avenue Park
Town of Bethlehem

Parks and Recreation Building
Town of Guilderland

Public Operations Building
Town of Colonie

Shaker Heritage Museum
Colonie

Unitas Memorial VFW Post 9594
Village of Ravena

Vietnam Memorial Park
City of Cohoes

Cornell Cooperative Extension Albany County
Town of New Scotland



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