

Local Rain Garden Flowering Plants



Louisiana Iris



Crinum Lilies



Louisiana Iris



Texas Star Hibiscus

Rain Gardens: Beautiful and Beneficial

**Valuable landscape amenity improves our waterways
and reduces flooding**



The rain garden near Butler Longhorn Museum in League City. When it rains, you can see the garden “in action” as it filters storm water from the parking lot, improving the water quality before it drains into our bayous and Galveston Bay.

Photos courtesy of Chris LeChance



Louisiana Iris



Giant Yellow Coneflower



Crinum Lillies



Button Bush

By Susan Burnell

“And I wonder, still I wonder, who’ll stop the rain?” wrote **Creedence Clearwater Revival’s John Fogerty**. The question isn’t answered in his song, but there is a way for you to stop the rain.

Granted, you can’t keep drenching storms away. But by building a rain garden, you can stop rainwater from rushing directly into storm drains. A rain garden is a bowl-shaped area filled with porous soil and plants that tolerate wet and dry conditions. Rain gardens in private and public landscapes help to slow down the excess rainwater that runs off parking lots, roads, driveways, lawns and roofs. By giving water time to seep into the soil, rain gardens help to filter out pollutants and replenish the aquifer.



“Rain gardens are a fairly new concept in this region,” says Chris LaChance, WaterSmart Landscaping Program Coordinator with the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service and Texas Sea Grant. “They are a pretty standard practice in other parts of the country, including the Pacific Northwest, Michigan, and the Northeast. Rain gardens are part of managing rainwater, or storm water, as we call it. The whole idea is that municipalities and individuals can play a role in the effort to manage the quality of the water released into our waterways.”

Cleaner lakes, bayous, and bay

Water from our watershed—including Clear Creek and Armand Bayou—all ends up in Galveston Bay. The Bay and the estuaries around Bay are part of the local economy and quality of life. So any effort to protect the water quality helps to maintain a healthy Bay for fishing, recreation, and tourism.

“Many people have the misconception that storm water goes somewhere and gets cleaned up,” says LaChance. “In developed areas, it doesn’t. Impervious surfaces like asphalt, concrete, roofing, and compacted soil prevent storm water from soaking in. So it goes directly from the storm drains into the nearest body of water—our bayous, lakes, rivers and Bay.” →

Create Your Own WaterSmart Rain Garden

The best time to plant any garden, including a rain garden, is in late fall so plants become acclimated before our dry, hot summers begin. Early spring would be the next best time. Like any new garden, a rain garden needs regular watering during the first two years to allow root systems adequate development.

A location in full sun is best—it allows for the greatest selection of flowering plants and water is able to evaporate and be absorbed more quickly.

RESOURCES

www.raingardens.org

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WaterSmart Landscapes for the
Upper Texas Gulf Coast • www.watersmart.cc

Impervious surfaces collect pollutants, and whenever it rains, those pollutants wash into storm drains. Pollutants can include oil, trash, sediment from construction sites, and chemicals like synthetic fertilizers and pesticides from treated lawns.

Rain gardens are a way for individual homeowners or commercial and public entities to manage storm water right where it falls, says LaChance. “A rain garden can capture runoff from a roof, sidewalk, parking lot, or street. That’s important, because that ‘first flush’ of storm runoff contains the most pollutants. Particles in the soil can actually bind to some of the pollutants the water contains, and plants can even take up some toxic heavy metals without harm. Rain gardens can do a really good job of cleaning up the water before it reaches the Bay.”

Excavate and let percolate

“Not every yard is conducive to a rain garden—it needs a bit of a slope,” LaChance explains. Instead of a typical

A WaterSmart Rain Garden

A rain garden is a bowl-shaped, planted area designed to collect, absorb and filter stormwater, or rainwater, that runs off impervious surfaces such as roofs, parking lots and streets.

How does a rain garden work?
Stormwater from impervious surfaces is directed into the rain garden. This slows the flow and gives it a chance to soak into the soil. As the stormwater moves through the rain garden, the soil, plants and mulch filter-out pollutants. Any stormwater leaving the rain garden is cleaner as it enters the stream/drain or nearest body of water.

How will a rain garden help?
Rain gardens protect water quality by helping to remove pollutants from stormwater runoff. At the same time, less water is lost to runoff—more of the stormwater remains where it falls. A rain garden is an attractive landscape feature.

What plants are used in a rain garden?
Native plants adapted to periods of both wet and dry conditions are best. Using native plants also helps to create a beautiful wildlife habitat.

Rain Garden in Action
Native trees, shrubs and perennials
Stormwater inflow
Temporary ponding area
Mulch
Overflow
Compost-enriched soil mix
Stormwater infiltration

What about mosquitoes?
When designed correctly with the proper plants and soil mix, a rain garden will not have standing water for more than 24 to 48 hours. LaChance says. “And the native plants will attract dragonflies, which are voracious mosquito eaters.”

watersmart.tamu.edu

Logos: Texas A&M University, Sea Grant, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, RAIN-BIRD, girl woods of san jorge, Houston Endowment.

raised-bed garden, a rain garden is excavated to make a shallow depression. Water is directed downhill into the rain garden where it is allowed to sit for a while and soak into the soil.

LaChance offers guidelines for rain garden construction in presentations she gives to community groups, including homeowners’ associations. She has also helped to develop rain gardens in public spaces with the help of volunteers. She encourages residents to visit these for ideas. (See sidebar, “Visit a Local Garden.”)

The soil in rain gardens should be amended with porous materials for better water absorption and compost for nourishment. The best plant choices are native trees, shrubs, and perennials. For the lowest point of the garden area, LaChance recommends plants typically found in wetland areas, which can withstand being inundated periodically. For the sides, choose plants that can handle having “wet feet” some of the time. Plants that can thrive in drier conditions can be planted around the edges. “When we use native plants, rain gardens can become wildlife habitats, attracting butterflies, hummingbirds and other birds,” she says.

And what about mosquitoes when you have standing water? “When designed properly, a rain garden will not have standing water for more than 24 to 48 hours,” LaChance says. “And the native plants will attract dragonflies, which are voracious mosquito eaters.”

Beyond their functional use, rain gardens can be an esthetically beautiful and valuable landscape amenity. So go ahead. Stop the rain for a while, beautify your yard, and protect the Bay, all at the same time. ☘

Visit a Local Rain Garden



UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON-CLEAR LAKE
(near Entrance 3, in front of the
Environmental Institute of Houston)
2700 Bay Area Blvd., Houston, Texas 77058
www.uhcl.edu

CLAUDE BURGESS CENTER
4200 Kalwick, Deer Park, TX 77536
www.deerparktx.gov



ARMAND BAYOU NATURE CENTER
(at the Visitors' Center)
8500 Bay Area Blvd., Pasadena, Texas 77507
www.abnc.org

**BUTLER LONGHORN MUSEUM
AND HERITAGE PARK**
(behind the museum)
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