

Sustainable living is the practice of conducting your life in such a way that every act creates a more healthy and wholesome environment around you. Many people attempt to incorporate sustainable practices in their daily lives when it comes to things like home and office design, transportation usage, carbon footprints and other common techniques, but one of the most often neglected areas when it comes to sustainability is the outdoor environment around our homes. The green spaces around our homes offer an impressive potential for applying sustainable practices, and with a bit of careful thought you can dramatically improve both the value of your home and the quality of your life within it.

When we pave over natural environments, we completely change the role that space plays in the water cycle and this often leads to flooding and storm damage thanks to excess water that isn't being absorbed back into the earth. Instead of seeing this as a problem, see it as an opportunity and build your own rain garden! A rain garden takes advantage of rainwater and storm runoff to create garden spaces that are as functional as they are beautiful. They are so effective at managing rainfall that in some cases as much as 80% of storm runoff can be diverted from the sewer systems, preventing floods and other stresses on urban infrastructure.

When you are designing your own personal rain garden it's usually a good idea to incorporate plants that are native to your area, as they are already going to be perfectly adapted for the climate, soil pH and water levels you're likely to see. If you select carefully you'll also be able to incorporate non-native adapted plant species that aren't native to your area but will still thrive in similar conditions, and this gives you much greater freedom when it comes to choosing which plants to use. You can still follow general garden design principles such as using fancy accent plants, textural ground covers, and variegated growth heights and foliage colors, just from the perspective of plant species that will thrive with your amount of rainfall.

There are as many ways to design rain gardens as there are spaces in which to plant them, and that can sometimes make it hard to decide where and how to create your own. To help you out with that, we've put together a couple of great ideas that might help inspire you to include one in your own living space.

### The Front Yard Rain Garden

Probably the most common home feature around the world is the driveway. Out of necessity they're typically paved for use by cars, but this also creates a huge amount of rainwater that isn't absorbed into the earth and simply runs down to the sewer system. A simple tweak in the angle of the driveway could direct all the runoff water to a garden space at the foot of your front yard, closest to the street. By continuing the pavement slightly to properly direct the flow of water, you can build a garden that is both beautiful and largely self-irrigating. If you select plants that are naturally tall, such as taller ornamental grasses and native shrubs, you'll even be able to grow your own front yard plant fence!

### The Downspout Rain Garden

Most (if not all) houses use a gutter system to direct the rain that accumulates on the roof during a storm. Typically, this water is then simply piped to a location closer to the street where it can run off into the sewer system, further overloading it and contributing to flooding issues. Depending on where your downspouts are located, you have another opportunity to incorporate a rain garden on your property.

A simple redirection of the downspouts will let you use rainwater for your garden, but to take things one step further, choose a side of your house where you have the space and sunlight required for a garden. Run a length of piping at a slight angle along the side of your house that connects to the eaves trough, and drill holes in the bottom front curve of the piping. As rain runs through the pipe, it will scatter out through the holes and act like an irrigation system!

### The Patio Rain Garden

Everyone loves to have a backyard patio to relax on, and usually that means some kind of hard surface for chairs, tables, BBQs and all the other backyard necessities of life. That surface probably collects almost as much rainwater as the driveway does, but it probably doesn't drain it nearly as well because there is (thankfully!) rarely much sewer infrastructure in our backyards. Even if you've already got a garden growing, it might not benefit from all that water because patios are rarely graded in a way that creates runoff. By making one simple change in the grade of your patio, you can dramatically improve its helpfulness to your gardens, and you probably won't notice the difference.

You can take it to the next level by adding two or even three very slight grades, each sloping away from the house, and using that extra rainwater to irrigate gardens that surround your patio on two or three sides. If you choose to plant the right combination of tall shrubs and small trees, you can even create a beautiful natural privacy fence that will provide you with shelter while you're outside enjoying your space!

Remember, these are just a few of the ways that you can design your garden. If you prefer vegetable gardens to flowers and shrubs, go ahead and plant those instead. Use your imagination, consider all the elements of the space, and the sky's the limit to what you can accomplish. No matter what you choose to do, a rain garden can help you take advantage of rainfall and storm runoff to save water on irrigation, prevent flooding and infrastructure problems, live more sustainably and even add some value to your home!