

Author's Note: This is the [enter number] in a series of articles by members of the City of Sanibel Vegetation Committee dealing with vegetative matters of concern to island residents. Members of the Vegetation Committee are Sanibel residents appointed by City Council for one-year terms. To be considered for appointment, contact the City Manager's Office at (239) 472-3700.)

Do you have water puddles on your yard? You may have the beginnings of a beautiful rain garden!

A rain garden is a garden of native plants planted in a depression which is usually formed on a natural slope. It is designed to hold and soak in rain water runoff that flows from roofs, driveways, sidewalks or lawns. Rain gardens are effective in removing up to 90% of nutrients and chemicals and up to 80% of sediment from the rainwater runoff. The EPA estimates that pollutants carried by rainwater runoff account for 70% of all water pollution.

Compared to a conventional lawn, rain gardens allow for 30% more water to soak into the ground. It's different than a water garden, pond, wetland or seasonal wetland. Rain gardens are dry most of the time, and typically hold water only during and after a rain event, typically 12-48 hours maximum. A rain garden is a storm water best management practice.

A rain garden can be a simple solution for a low area of your yard that already collects rainwater. As rainwater collects in the garden, it slowly seeps into the soil, replenishing groundwater and reducing the volume of polluted stormwater entering our waterways. This natural filtration system helps reduce pollution, erosion, and flooding, while creating a thriving habitat for birds, butterflies, and beneficial insects.

#### Benefits of Rain Gardens

- **Reduced Flooding:** By absorbing rainwater, rain gardens help to alleviate flooding, especially during heavy rainfall events. This is crucial for a low-lying island like Sanibel.
- **Improved Water Quality:** Rain gardens act as nature's filters, removing pollutants such as fertilizers, pesticides, and oil from stormwater runoff before it reaches the Gulf of Mexico. This helps protect our precious marine ecosystems.
- **Reduced Erosion:** By slowing down the flow of water, rain gardens help prevent soil erosion and protect our shorelines.
- **Groundwater Recharge:** Rain gardens replenish groundwater supplies, which is essential for maintaining our drinking water quality and supporting local vegetation.
- **Habitat for Wildlife:** Native plants in rain gardens provide food and shelter for a variety of birds, butterflies, and beneficial insects, enhancing biodiversity.
- **Aesthetic Appeal:** Rain gardens can be designed to complement any landscape style, adding beauty and interest to your outdoor space.

How to start? By doing a bit of planning!

- Pick a site for your garden that tends to collect rainwater or where runoff from your driveway or downspout can be diverted into it.
- If your rain garden will be fed by downspouts, make sure that it is at least 10 feet away from foundations, decks, privacy fences, and underground utilities.
- If you will need to dig, call 811 a week or so in advance so that the utilities companies can come out to your yard to flag where all of your utilities are located. There is no charge for the service.
- Remove any sod and weeds in the area.
- Select a mix of native plants that do not mind getting "wet feet" but that can tolerate long periods of dry weather. There are many that will die if they are kept too wet or too dry for

extended periods. Using different types of native plants will create a complete and cohesive look that will provide year-round interest, and provide a varied habitat for wildlife.

- Allocate time to periodically water the plants during dry spells, until they get established; and make sure to apply a 2-3 inches of mulch annually to help keep the moisture and reduce weeds (see “Much Ado about Mulches” article at <https://www.mysanibel.com/content/download/24636/file/Much%20Ado%20About%20Mulches.pdf>).

Some good native flowering plants for rain gardens include blue flag iris (*Iris virginica*) and spider lily (*Lycoris radiata*). Consider including native colorful ornamental grasses like muhly grass (*Muhlenbergia capillaris*), and some native shrubs, such as Christmas berry (*Lycium carolinianum*). A list of the plants in the two rain gardens at the City of Sanibel City Hall gardens is available at [add URL].

For additional native plants that tolerate wet to dry conditions, please review the City of Sanibel's Horticulturally Available Native Plant List at <https://www.mysanibel.com/content/download/31771/file/Hort%20Aval%20Plants%20List-images%202021%20Updates.pdf>.

Where can I learn more about native plants on Sanibel? The Vegetation Committee members host free plant walks from November to April at City Hall to view and discuss the use of native plants. Everyone and their questions are welcome! Make sure to sign-up to receive the walks' dates and times as well as other news from the City: <https://www.mysanibel.com/government/city-manager-s-office/useful-links/sign-up-for-city-announcements>

To read other Vegetation Committee articles please visit the City of Sanibel's Natural Resources Department website: <https://www.mysanibel.com/government/natural-resources/useful-links/vegetation-information/vegetation-committee>

Have questions? Need more information? Contact the City of Sanibel's Natural Resources Department: (239) 472-3700.

Go native with the right help!

Photos: Sanibel rain gardens