

For Vermont Standard  
Sage Sassafra column on gardening  
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### Rain Gardens

The next time you see space around a parking lot sketched creatively with assorted native plants, please take a second look. You may see that the parking lot slopes ever-so-slightly toward the garden so that run-off from the parking lot – rain and oil and whatever else spews over the lot – will drain into this planting display.

This may well be a purpose-designed space called a rain garden that helps prevent flooding and protects waterways by filtering pollutants deep into the soil that can soak up run-off 30 percent faster than a typical lawn.

Typical pollutants from snowmelt and rainwater runoff from roofs, parking lots, roads, driveways and compacted soils include sediment, nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorus, bacteria from animal waste; and oil, grease and heavy metals from cars.

Vermont Rain Garden Manual ([vacd.org/winooski/VtRainGardenManual.pdf](http://vacd.org/winooski/VtRainGardenManual.pdf)) calls making a rain garden “Gardening to Absorb the Storm”. The rain garden should be roughly one-third the size of the drainage area. Consider the type and depth of the soil and the slope of the land. A small berm edges the garden, keeping the heavy flow in the garden until the water is absorbed. Whatever the slope of the site chosen, the garden itself must have a flat surface and be planted in a variety of native plants that can tolerate both wet and dry conditions..

Site a rain garden at least 10 feet away from a building to prevent water from seeping into the basement. Gutter extensions and grass or rock-lined swales can direct the runoff water from the drainage area into the rain garden that should not be near a septic tank, leach field, drinking water well, or underground pipes, wiring or utilities. It is best to stay away from existing trees, whose roots may be compromised by the extra soil moisture. Don't create the garden in a naturally wet area that can result in a mosquito-breeding pond.

Once intact, a rain garden complements a landscaping plan, provides wildlife habitat and assuages your conscience because you're being a friend to the environment.