

Rain Garden Maintenance Guide



Watering

While plants in the rain garden are young and becoming established, they may need to be watered, especially during dry periods. A good rule of thumb to follow is to make sure the garden receives about one inch of water a week during the first growing season.

Thorough watering will encourage good root development. Light surface watering will only encourage roots to grow close to the surface, so be sure that water is allowed to soak deeply into the ground.

If you water with a hose, fill the garden with water to a depth of about one inch and let it soak in. If you use a hose to water, let the water run over rocks or some other hard surface so that you will not cause erosion – better yet, use a soaker hose. If you use a sprinkler, set some cups or other containers around the garden. When the cups hold about one inch of water, you've watered enough.

After the plants have established deep root systems – typically in the second and subsequent years – you should not need to water the rain garden unless two weeks go by with no rain or if the plants you have selected like consistently wet conditions. That is why it is important to choose plants suitable for your site conditions.

Too Much Water?

Large, mature plants absorb more water and can tolerate very wet conditions better than small, young plants. If you have an extended rainy period in the first year after your garden is planted, you may need to provide a way for the garden to drain.

You can do this by cutting a notch in the berm around the garden, if there is one. This will let some of the water leave the garden, allowing young plants to become established. After the first year, you can fill in the notch so the garden will hold more water. As your plants mature you may find that water is soaking into the ground even faster than the first year the garden was planted due to larger, more mature plants that have higher water absorption needs.

Weeding

Pulling weeds is important to reduce competition for space, light and water. Most weeds are pioneer species, meaning that they grow very quickly, filling in open spaces and crowding out desirable plants. For the first couple of years after the garden is planted you will need to remove weeds often throughout the growing season. As the rain garden plants mature and fill in the garden, weeding will be required much less often, if at all.

Remove by hand only those plants that you are certain are weeds. Be sure to pull out weeds by the roots and do so before they turn to seed. The pictures to the right show some common weeds that may be found in rain gardens.



Purslane



Canada Thistle



Clover



Dandelion



Crab Grass



Prostrate Spurge

Pruning

Pruning helps direct plant growth, improves plant health, and increases flower production. Rain garden plants may be pruned or thinned during the growing season to maintain the look you want. Many of the perennial flowers planted in rain gardens make beautiful cuttings for bouquets. Dead vegetation and debris should be removed from the garden periodically. Vegetation should be cut back in the early spring or fall. This kind of cutting removes dead foliage, makes way for new growth and is important to maintain a prosperous garden.

Pruning in the fall after growth and blooming have stopped may be easier than pruning in spring. But plant foliage and stems left in place over the winter can provide visual interest. For example, some native and ornamental grasses turn shades of red or copper in the fall and will hold their shape and color throughout the winter. These and other plants can be especially attractive against a background of winter snow. Not only are they aesthetically pleasing but also beneficial, many native flower heads contain seeds that birds will eat during the fall and winter.

If you prune dead foliage in the early spring, you will need to be careful not to cut out new growth that may be starting around the base of the plants.

Mulching

Mulching helps keep plants cool and moist, prevents erosion and can help to control weeds in the garden. It also helps define the garden area and provides a more formal appearance. By maintaining a 3-inch mulch layer, weed growth will be limited or at least weeds will be easier to pull out as they will have shallower roots within the mulch layer.

Herbicides and fertilizers should not be used in your rain garden.

In the first few growing seasons or as-needed, add double shredded hardwood mulch to maintain a 3-inch deep mulch layer. Chipped bark is less desirable as it tends to float when the garden fills with rain water. Double shredded mulch is best because the pieces will lock together and are less likely to float.

Here's an idea of how much mulch you will need for a layer 3 inches thick:

Size of Rain Garden	Approximate Amount of Mulch
50 square feet	0.5 cubic yard
100 square feet	1 cubic yard
150 square feet	1.5 cubic yards
200 square feet	2 cubic yards

Some plants are dormant until late spring, so be careful not to bury plant crowns when you mulch. Burying the crown can cause the plants to rot and die.

A Word About Salt

If your garden is near a driveway or a road that is heavily salted in the winter, you have probably planted species that have a greater salt tolerance.

According to the *Blue Thumb Guide to Rain Gardens*: "Road salt does the most damage to plants when it is splattered on live foliage and stems. Fortunately, many perennial rain garden plants are dormant in the winter and not subject to this type of damage."

In areas with sandy soil, the salty runoff will be flushed through the soil before plants begin to grow again in the spring. In areas with clay soils, the garden may retain more salt. Choosing plants with a higher salt tolerance will help as will planting a grass strip between the garden and the road to filter salt out of runoff before it arrives in the garden.

Maintenance by Season

Spring

- Prune dead vegetation (if not done in fall)
- Cut or divide plants that get too large; instructions for dividing plants can be found at www.catchingrainfw.org
- Remove sediment, leaves or debris that has accumulated around plants and where water enters the garden
- Pull weeds as needed — the more often you pull weeds the less time it will take
- Add plants, if desired
- Add double shredded hardwood mulch to maintain a 3" layer

Summer

- Pull weeds as needed
- Check the following website for excellent photos of common weeds: www.rce.rutgers.edu/weeds/default.asp
- Water during dry periods
- Water during the early morning and soak the garden thoroughly
- Remove dying or diseased plants
- Remove debris following rain storms
- Check the garden regularly for erosion and add soil, mulch or more plants to control erosion

Fall

- Prune dead vegetation (optional)
- Divide plants that have gotten too large
- Collect seed for next year planting
- Plant native plants if desired, native seed does best with a season of over-wintering

Winter

- Think Spring! Leave remaining vegetation through winter to stabilize soil
- Dead vegetation and seed heads can provide shelter and food for birds
- Stalks covered with snow provide visual interest

All Seasons

- As you work in the garden, try to minimize how much you walk inside the garden area
- Walking on the garden surface compacts the soil and can reduce the garden's ability to absorb rain water