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News Release

Low tech rain gardens offer landscape function and beauty

Question: I thought gardening in a drought in 2007 was difficult but gardening with excess water presents its own challenges. What advice can you give to deal with excess water in the landscape?

Answer: There are several ways to deal with excess water, but clearly the way we do it now in urban areas does not work very well. We have large areas of paved surfaces and roof tops and we direct water into storm water systems that often become overwhelmed. Traditionally we have thought it is best to get the water off of our property as quickly as possible. This thought process has created the problems we see from excess storm water. We need to rethink this strategy, and I am afraid if we leave it to the politicians to solve we will continue to get what we have gotten so far. Each individual and business needs to take ownership of the problem so that you will get involved in the solution. What if every home, apartment complex, business or neighborhood could capture the first inch or so of rainfall in any rain event? I believe for most this is achievable and it would go a long way towards reducing storm water problems and associated non-point source pollution coming from the landscape.

Rain gardens are an old idea whose time has come again. Let's face facts. We in the southeast live in a climate where we always have and always will have a feast or famine of rainfall. Even those with a short term memory can recall the severe drought of 2007. However, those of us with better memories and a few years behind us knew the day would come when flooding would be a problem again. Rain gardens offer a low tech and relatively low cost way of slowing down water to infiltrate rather than contribute to the storm water problem. Storm water and the associated non-point pollution eventually make its way to our streams and rivers. Anything we can do to reduce the volume of water will not only reduce the pollution potential but will lower the cost of managing excess storm water.

Simply speaking a rain garden is a depression or swale in the landscape designed to capture and retain runoff for short periods of time. If designed properly a rain garden should drain in three days or less and provide a way to direct overflow in periods of continual rainfall such as we have recently experienced in much of the southeast. Rain gardens can and should be a landscape asset both in terms of function and beauty. Ideally they should be located several feet away from the

home to avoid contributing to water related problems in the basement or foundation. Water that currently runs off the roof, walks, parking areas and driveways could be diverted to these depressions to slowly soak into the ground.

Do not think of a rain garden as a pond that does not hold water very well. Think of it as a true garden in every sense of the word. It is not just a landscape feature but a critical component of the functionality and beauty of the landscape. Choose plants that can tolerate both occasional flooding and fairly extreme drought. Fortunately, we have many southeast natives that fit the bill very well because many of them have had a feast or famine relationship with water for a very long time. Because of this long standing weather pattern many native plants have become adapted to these environmental conditions. However, not all native plants will thrive in these conditions so you must do a little research before choosing your plants. Native plants fill niches within our environment so look for those plants that naturally grow in the light and soil conditions you have or will create within a rain garden. Do not forget about the many tried and true non-native plants that also grow well under these conditions.

Many books are available to help you make the right plant choices but for a more comprehensive look at this topic I strongly recommend *Rain Gardening in the South*, by Helen Kraus and Anne Spafford. As the name implies this book focuses on strategies as well as plants that work for southern conditions. Even though rain gardens are low tech they are not simple given that they are a small ecosystem unto themselves. Therefore, careful attention to design is important to make certain it functions as intended. For instance, you do not want to build a mosquito haven; this must be addressed early to avoid costly “do over’s.”

Don’t forget to call before you dig to avoid costly and potentially dangerous encounters with underground utilities. Contact “Alabama One Call” at 811 or check their web address at www.al1call.com. For further information on building your own rain garden visit the Alabama Cooperative Extension System web site at www.aces.edu and type in rain garden in the search box at the top. Also, we will be conducting a rain garden workshop at Jefferson State Community College in Pell City on May 14th from 9 till noon. Registration forms are available for download at www.aces.edu/StClair or you can call the St. Clair County Extension office at (205) 338-9416. For more information on this topic or other horticulture related questions, please contact Regional Extension Agent Tony Glover at (205) 338-9416 or email gloveta@aces.edu