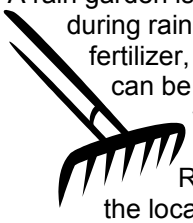
Native Plants for Rain Gardens

Why Use Native Plants?

It is advantageous to use native plants when creating a rain garden because they require less maintenance than horticultural varieties that have not adapted to our local weather patterns and soil conditions. Native plants also create more diverse habitats for wildlife, attracting more than 3 times the number of beneficial insects than non-native plants.

The plants and soil in a rain garden clean stormwater runoff by absorbing and filtering pollution as the water soaks into the ground. This water is cleaned by plants, soil and beneficial bacteria in the rain garden. For a rain garden to work, native plants must be selected, installed, and maintained properly. A list of native plants that can be used in rain gardens located in the mid-Atlantic region can be found on pages 2 and 3.

What are the Benefits of a rain garden?



A rain garden is a landscaped area specially designed to collect and treat polluted runoff generated on the landscape during rain events. Polluted runoff- also known as “stormwater,” is water that is filled with such pollutants as lawn fertilizer, pesticides and oil. Rather than letting these pollutants flow naturally towards a storm drain a rain garden can be implemented in your yard to filter and clean the pollutants in the water before entering into your local waterway and eventually the Chesapeake Bay.

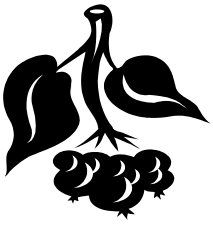
Rain gardens not only recharge local groundwater, but also reduce the volume of stormwater that enters the local streams, preventing damage to the stream channel and aquatic animals. Rain gardens are a way for homeowners and businesses to reduce the impacts of stormwater from their properties and protect water quality in the community. The many benefits of a rain garden include enhancing the beauty of your yard, protecting your community from flood and drainage issues, and protecting the Chesapeake Bay from pollutants that are carried in urban stormwater.

Rain Garden Tips:

- Place your rain garden at least 10 ft. from the foundation
- Build the garden in a full or partial sun area.
- Choose hardy, native plants for your garden.
- Use shredded hardwood mulch for better absorption

Rain Garden in Fairville Park, Harrisburg, PA

Native Plant List



Trees	Botanical Name	Planting Zone	Height	Bloom/Fruit	Wildlife Value
Serviceberry	Amelanchier canadensis	High	35 -50 ft.	Maroon-purple berries	High
Red maple	Acer rubrum	Middle to high	75 -100 ft.	Red bloom	Very high
River birch	Betula nigra	Middle	40 -70 ft.	Catkin flower	High
Redbud	Cercis canadensis	High	20 -30 ft.	Pinkish bloom	Low
Green ash	Fraxinus pennsylvanica	Middle	50 -75 ft.	Loose, purplish clusters	Low
Black gum	Nyssa sylvatica	Middle to high	50 -75 ft.	Blue-black berries	Medium
Swamp white oak	Quercus bicolor	Ponding to middle	60 -75 ft.	Acorns	Very high

Shrubs	Botanical Name	Planting Zone	Height	Bloom/Fruit	Wildlife Value
Red chokeberry	Photinia (Aronia) arbutifolia	Middle to high	4 -10 ft.	White flowers/ bright red berry, May-June	Medium
Black chokeberry	Photinia (Aronia) melanocarpa	Ponding to middle	3 -6 ft.	Black berries	Medium
Buttonbush	Cephalanthus occidentalis	Ponding area	To 15 ft.	Creamy white flower, July	High-nectar
Red-osier dogwood	Cornus sericea/ stolonifera	Ponding to middle	8 -10 ft.	White flower, May-June	Very high-nectar
Winterberry	Ilex verticillata	Ponding to middle	6 -12 ft.	Red berry-like drupe (need male and female)	Medium
Fragrant Sumac	Rhus aromatica	High to berm	To 3 ft.	Red fruit	High –nectar
Elderberry, American	Sambucus canadensis	Middle	6 -12 ft.	White flower, edible purple/black berry, June-July,	Very high-nectar
Arrowood	Viburnum dentatum	Middle to high	6 -8 ft.	White flower, May-June, dark blue berry-like drupe	High

Ground-cover	Botanical Name	Planting Zone	Height	Bloom/Fruit	Wildlife Value
Creeping phlox	Phlox stolonifera	Berm	0.1 –1.5 ft.	Blue, red-purple or violet, April – June	Medium
Moss phlox	Phlox subulata	Berm	To 1 ft.	Pink, white or blue flowers, May	Low
Woodland stonedrop	Sedum ternatum	Berm	0.5 in.	Greenish – white, April - June	Low

More Native Plants

Perennials	Botanical Name	Planting Zone	Height	Bloom/Fruit	Wildlife Value
Wild columbine	Aquilegia canadensis	Middle to berm	8 -24 in.	Red and yellow flowers, May - June	High- hummingbirds
Swamp milkweed	Asclepias incarnata	Ponding to middle	2 -4 ft.	Pink-red flowers, July - September	Very high
Butterfly milkweed	Asclepias tuberosa	High	1.5- 3 ft.	Orange flowers, July - August	Very high
New England aster	Symphyotrichum (Aster) novae-angliae	Ponding to middle	3-4 ft.	Lavender flowers, July - October	High
Joepye weed	Eupatorium fistulosum/ maculatum	Ponding to middle	To 72 in.	Pink-purple flowers, summer	High -nectar
Blazingstar	Liatris spicata	Middle to high	2 -3 ft.	Purple flower spikes, summer to frost	Medium
Cardinal flower	Lobelia cardinalis	Ponding	24 - 48 in.	Scarlet flowers, July- September	Very high
Great blue lobelia	L. siphilitica	Middle to high	3 - 4 ft.	Bluish purple flowers, August– September	Very high
Virginia bluebell	Mertensia virginica	Ponding to middle	8 - 24 in.	Blue flowers, April - May	Medium
Spiderwort	Tradescantia virginica	Middle	To 3 ft.	Purplish blue, April - July	Medium
Black-eyed Susan	Rudbeckia fulgida	Middle to berm	2 - 3 ft.	Yellow flowers, July- October	High
New York ironweed	Veronia noveboracensis	Ponding to middle	36- 72 in.	Purple flowers, August - October	Medium- nectar

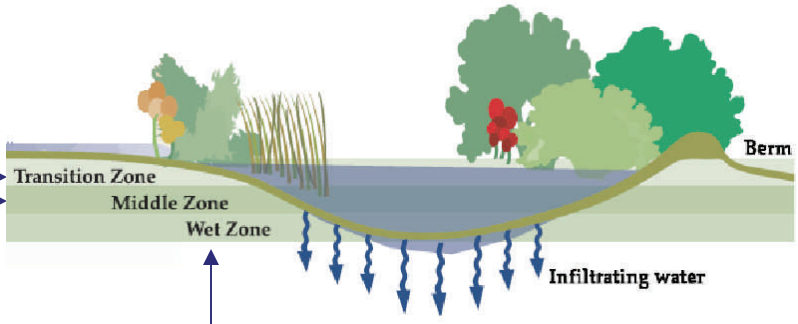
Grasses, Sedges,	Botanical Name	Planting Zone	Height	Bloom/Fruit	Wildlife Value
Tussock sedge	Carex stricta	Ponding	1 -4 ft.	Greenish flower, May- August	Medium
Soft rush	Juncus effusus	Ponding	2 -4 ft.	Brown capsule, June- September	Medium
Switch grass	Panicum virgatum	Ponding to high	3 -6 ft.	July- September	High
Little bluestem	Schizachyrium scoparium	High to berm	2 -3 ft.	Light to green blue	High
Canada wild rye	Elymus canadensis	Middle to berm	2 -6.5 ft.	June- October	Medium
Bottlebrush grass	Hystrix patula	Middle to Berm	2 -4 ft.	June– August	Medium

Disclaimer: Listed above is selected list of plants proven to grow well in a rain garden in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Keep in mind, there may be other natives not listed that will work as well. Not all plants listed above may grow in region where you live. Please check with your local cooperative extension agent or native plant expert before planting.

What are the Planting Zones?

The Higher/Transition zone includes a portion of the Berm and often is the driest of the three zones.

The Middle zone is slightly drier, and the plants can tolerate fluctuating water levels.



The Berm can be a strip of turf or groundcover at the top edge of the rain garden, and usually is dry.

The Wet zone, or Ponding area, is where runoff first enters the rain garden, therefore, the plants here must tolerate standing water and fluctuating water levels.

Resources and Further Reading

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This list is for education purposes only and does not constitute an endorsement by ACB

This publication was developed by the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay, a regional non-profit organization that builds and fosters partnerships to restore and protect the Bay and its rivers.

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