

# GOING GREEN IN SPRING – RAIN GARDENS



In the garden with Wendy Matheson

April is an appropriate month to talk about precipitation and its effects on our gardens and landscapes areas. The unforgiving rain hammers down upon us poor Highlanders especially in the west and it would be foolhardy of us to think that because we don't live in urban inner city concrete jungles we are not affected.

The way we deal with the encroaching ecological challenges and climate change today will impact heavily on future generations. Gone are the days when eco-warriors were viewed as slightly idealistic odd-ball characters; we are now faced with the same realities many realised decades ago.

Rain gardens – not to be confused with water features.

The idea of designing an entire garden around the intermittent presence of water is extremely inspiring for a designer and will become an increasingly used resource. If it helps to sound the death knell of the now-ubiquitous garden centre “water feature”, run on mains water, powered by electricity, and often stylistically parachuted into the garden, with no use or relevance to the rest of the scheme, it will not have come a day too soon.

A few years ago gardeners were looking to the Mediterranean for inspiration to beat climate change and we were preoccupied with designing for drought resistance with rammed earth walls and a planting palette of lavender and santolina. The celebrities of the garden design world were winning gold for their lunar landscaped drought gardens and water saving design solutions.

In great contrast, more recent times have seen us beleaguered by flash flooding, water courses changing directions and downpours on a biblical scale, along with having to cope with other extremes such as unseasonal cold and occasional scorching heat.

These must surely be signs that there are radical changes to be made in the way we view our gardens and landscaped areas.

The solutions are not necessarily solely in the domain of the town planners, politicians and engineers but to those of us who can collectively make a difference with the planning of rain gardens on a domestic scale. Where small techniques can make a huge difference to the designed landscape.

From the first ancient gardens of Persia where necessary irrigation was aesthetically used we have come full circle with water having become a finite and unpredictable source which we need to conserve and harness. How we utilise those excesses and effectively capture and store the water in times of drought with aesthetic considerations is the main question.

It is necessary to understand how water behaves naturally in our surroundings, for example building housing schemes on flood plains where there should be wild flower meadow and ponds comes to mind. On the more domestic scale it is up to garden designers to marry the architecture of the building with the surrounding landscape and water management will play an increasingly important part.

Rain gardens are good for wildlife and biodiversity. Although lawn and other low monoculture vegetation are much better at soaking up and trapping excess run-off than paved areas. Large areas of intensely



Rain chains are available in a number of creative designs



A rain garden in an urban context

managed grass will not be as effective as mixed naturalistic planting. These will result in reduced needs for maintenance, input of fertiliser, water and energy. Mixed habitat greatly increases the wildlife value of a garden. Although there are strong moral and ecological reasons why native plants should be the first choice, those from other regions of the world can be used that do the same job in a rain garden.

An ideal mix for encouraging a great diversity of wildlife, a rain garden should largely comprise flowering perennials and grasses with a scattering of shrubs.

Although very accessible and useful, a few strategically placed water butts won't solve the larger issues of water management.

At present, rainwater that falls on to buildings or hard surfaces is directed straight into drains, which rushes away into rivers, sewers or massive urban treatment centres, while we still rely largely on the mains supply for watering our parks and gardens. The recent trend for replacing planted areas with impermeable paving, concrete paths, patios and car parking, has only exacerbated the problem, particularly after heavy rains, when storm surges cause drains and sewers to flood. And when prolonged drought necessitates hosepipe and sprinkler bans, our landscapes pay the price.

Begin with reducing hard surfaces: Using permeable surfaces such as gravel rather than cement, promoting mixed planting, and creating green roofs wherever possible. The increased vegetation intercepts heavy rainfall, slowing and reducing run-off, and looks beautiful into the bargain.

Capture run-off by disconnecting downpipes – practice on a shed to begin with. This can

be done with conventional water butts, but also via more convoluted routes – emptying downpipes into deep-sided storm water planters, with run-off rills and gullies dispersing excess water to other spots in the garden where it can be used for irrigating vegetables, or emptied into a pond.

Another important tenet of rain gardening is to make water and its flow visible, wherever possible. Rain chains in cup or link designs, an ancient decorative feature from Japan can be used instead of downpipes while the rills and gullies that transport the water become attractive components in the garden rather than buried underground.

Designed to look good whether full or dry, the gullies can take a wide range of forms – from a delta of six-inch-wide streams in which children can sail toy boats (substitute model cars or marbles when dry) to wider channels set within paving or steps inspired by the Alhambra or the Villa Lante.

These channels might lead into lower-lying dips in the landscape, lined with pebbles or planted with vegetation that can cope with periods underwater – or run into permanent ponds, which can overflow, when needed.

Functioning best when long, shallow and meandering in form these dips slow the progress of excess water, allowing for natural evaporation into the air and absorption into the soil. Only when they become full, at the very end of the storm water chain, is excess water diverted into the conventional drainage network.

It is by no means necessary to include all of these elements into your garden. Just one or two will break the conventional drainage chain of roof or paved surface to sewer, but combining two or more ideas will multiply the benefits. If rain harvesting and wildlife ponds isn't your bag then perhaps that area of aged, chipped concrete should be pulled up and planted with some low maintenance shrubs or that small kitchen garden plot or herb bed you've been promising. Keep your mown grass to a minimum and incorporate longer grasses and wildflower mixes into the peripheries of your lawn.



Naturalist meadow planting

It is a fact that even small planting and pond schemes trialled by the Forestry Commission have been hugely successful in flood prevention.

Flooding in the tropics where rainforest has been removed also shows that nature can cope with some of the mistakes we have made. As my mother-in-law would have said, “every mickle makes a muckle”, and each rain garden will help more than you think.

## CONTACT WENDY

If you wish to find out more about rain gardens or if you know your garden could look better than it does but you are struggling to achieve its potential and would like to discuss any forthcoming or current garden project with Wendy, please contact her on: 07703 737 530, [info@wmgardendesign.com](mailto:info@wmgardendesign.com) or go to [www.wmgardendesign.com](http://www.wmgardendesign.com)

## COMPETITION WINNER

Winner of the garden competition in Wendy's February feature was K Fraser from Tomich. Congratulations – WM Garden Design will be providing you with a free design consultancy.

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## This month's must-have book

Nigel Dunnett is an inspirational senior lecturer at the University of Sheffield and co-author of one of the groundbreaking books on the subject of water management in the landscape.

*Rain Gardens* “Managing water sustainably in the garden and designed landscape” by Nigel Dunnett and Andy Clayden.

ISBN 978-0-88192-826-6

This book covers techniques such as using permeable and porous paving, natural swimming pools, wildlife ponds, rainwater harvesting and storage, green roofs and much more.

