

Pinelands Nursery
Columbus, Burlington County, NJ
Photograph courtesy of Don Knezik



MAINTAINING YOUR RAIN GARDEN

Key Points:

- Rain gardens are **low** maintenance gardens, not **no** maintenance gardens!
- Rain gardens should be inspected during the growing season, at the end of the growing season, after large storm events, and during weather extremes.
- The maintenance of a rain garden consists of tasks to be completed on a weekly basis and other tasks as they are needed seasonally.

CHAPTER 4

Maintaining Your Rain Garden

Initial Things to Consider

A rain garden will not require as much care as a lawn area but will need some maintenance to ensure long-term success. Weekly maintenance tasks include watering and weeding, while tasks such as mulching, pruning, mowing, re-planting, and soil testing can occur less frequently on an annual basis.

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REMEMBER TO:

Take pictures before, during, and after installation!

Town of Ulster Municipal Building
Ulster, NY



Weekly Maintenance

Watering

Water plants regularly, particularly during dry periods of the first growing season. Of course, the amount of water you provide will vary depending upon the plant species selected, but most plants require about an inch of water per week during the first growing season. Root systems will develop and become more substantial, so that after the first growing season, you will only have to water during severe dry periods.

Keep in mind that young, small plants are most vulnerable to stress. Be cautious that they do not get too dry or too wet. If you expect large amounts of rain soon after the rain garden's installation, cut an indentation in the berm. This notch will prevent the water in the rain garden from getting too deep and oversaturating the young plants. To be most effective, make sure that this indentation is cut lower than the overflow notch. You can fill in the indentation after a few months, once the plants have grown a bit larger, so that the rain garden will collect and contain more water.

Weeding

During the first few years, you will, more than likely, need to weed often during the growing season. You will need to weed less and less as the plants grow and surpass the weeds, so that by the third year you should only be weeding several times a year. Watch out for the most aggressive, invasive weed species.



Common Invasive Plants

(from left to right)

Multiflora Rose
Chinese Wisteria
Japanese Honeysuckle
Purple Loosestrife

Japanese Stiltgrass
Thistle
Asiatic Bittersweet
Garlic Mustard

Annual Maintenance

Mulching

Add mulch every spring to maintain a three inch mulch layer on your rain garden. The mulch should prohibit most, if not all, weed growth. Any weeds that do succeed in growing should be easy to remove because they will have shallow roots. In addition to limiting weed seed germination, mulching also prevents the loss of soil through erosion. Remember that triple shredded hardwood mulch with no dye is preferred for rain gardens.

Pruning

Each spring, prune dead vegetation, deadhead flowers, and cut back tattered or unwieldy plants. This will encourage dense, new growth and improve the rain garden's filtering capacity. Remember that stems and seed heads can be left on the plants for winter interest, wildlife cover, and food for birds.

Replanting

Remove or replace plant material that is not thriving. Consider planting more of a particularly successful species.

Sediment Removal

Your rain garden may accumulate sediment, particularly if it collects runoff from a driveway or a road. This is a sign of success; however, occasionally use a flat shovel to remove any excess sediment, leaves, or debris. Be cautious particularly of any buildup occurring near the water inlet of the rain garden, especially if your rain garden is located next to a driveway or road and you notice sand in the buildup. A grass buffer, near the rain garden's inlet and between the rain garden and the road, will prevent road sand, salt, and sediment from entering your rain garden. A small rock bed at the inlet will function similarly. The debris in the water will drop out along the grass strip or rock bed, making it easier to clean your rain garden.



Rutgers County Extension Burlington County
Westampton, NJ

Soil Testing

Since you determined the nutrient and pH levels of your soil before planting the rain garden, remember to retest the soil every three to five years. Follow the recommendations to maintain the soil pH in an acidic range. If pH is less than 5.2, apply limestone; if greater than 7.0 to 8.0, add iron sulfate and sulfur to reduce pH. Add these amendments when no storms are expected to prevent runoff. Be sure to follow instructions or contact the local county extension office for guidance to prevent runoff of applied materials.

Fertilizing

Fertilizing is NOT a part of maintaining your rain garden! The garden sustains itself with the help of organic material in the topsoil.

Next Steps

Additional maintenance includes seed collection and taking cuttings from successful plants, planting more of a particularly successful species, re-seeding the berm if necessary, replacing rocks that may be diverting flow out of the garden, and building up areas where more protection is needed to prevent erosion.

After installation, if the rain garden is not infiltrating at the desired rate, make holes using an augur in the rain garden and fill these holes with coarse sand. Refer to page 23 of this Manual for more information.

CONSIDER THIS:

Many native plant species provide berries for birds, nectar for butterflies and hummingbirds, and food for caterpillars.

Make sure that your local nursery propagates from seed! This will increase regional plant diversity.

Before & After Annual Maintenance



Essex County Environmental Center
Roseland, NJ

A Rain Garden Over Time



At time of installation
Springfield Township Municipal Annex Building
Springfield, NJ



First growing season



Second growing season



Third growing season



Fourth growing season