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COURTESY PACIFIC COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS

A new rain garden

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area already has standing water or high groundwater during the winter, that would not be a suitable site for a rain garden.

Get to work

Once an appropriate site has been found, you can design and build a rain garden as big or as small as needed, and tailor the plants to fit into your garden design.

The construction of a rain garden entails digging out the desired area about 2 to 3 feet deep and installing the inflow and establishing the overflow.

Stormwater can be channeled into the garden by a swale or a pipe. At the other end, line the overflow with rocks to direct the excess water away into a smaller rain garden or open space (away from buildings or neighboring properties). The excavated area is then refilled partway with a well-draining soil mix, leaving 6 to 12 inches

of ponding depth where stormwater can accumulate and be held as it percolates into the earth.

The unique climate of the Pacific Northwest means that the plants for the rain garden must be both water- and drought-tolerant. Thankfully, native species are adapted to this climate.

Place water-lovers — such as rushes, sedges, iris, red-twig dogwood and twin-berry — in the center (see Zone 1) of the garden.

Daylilies, camas, columbine, boxwood honeysuckle and dwarf Oregon grape can add color and texture to the next layer (see Zone 2) in the intermediate area between the deep center and outer berms.

The plants toward the outer edges (Zone 3) should be the most drought-tolerant, such as evergreen huckleberry, red-flowering currant, snowberry and various ornamental grasses.

Directly after planting, be sure to cover the bare ground with a mulch, such

as wood chips to retain soil moisture, reduce weed pressure and prevent erosion.

A year-round delight

In the first two years, it is important to keep the young plants well-watered and the weed pressure low, but once established, this garden will be relatively care-free. Just remember to keep the inlets and overflows clear and reapply mulch as necessary.

The layers of lush vegetation in this rain garden will provide wildlife habitat and stunning year-round displays of flowers and unique foliage, all while capturing and cleaning the stormwater!

For more detailed instructions and tips, explore ext100.wsu.edu/raingarden/ for an excellent demonstration video, a downloadable version of Rain Garden Handbook for Western Washington and more.

Kim Smith, who lives in Porter, Washington, joined Washington State University's Master Gardener Program in 2016. 