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Fairlington Rain Gardens Are Working

Our Fairlington landscape is now home to six rain gardens, with a seventh soon to join them. Some are identified by signage, some not. But, if they were service animals, they might all bear the sign, "Please don't pet me, I'm working." Rain gardens have a specific job in our landscape. They are designed and carefully constructed to collect, filter, and absorb water runoff during heavy rains. Beneath their surface plantings lie 24 inches or more of gravel to promote drainage within 24 hours. They are usually built near existing storm drains, where they can have the greatest benefit in preventing silt and other pollutants from entering Arlington's storm sewers. You may be surprised to learn, as I was, that those storm sewers open directly without any treatment into local streams. What our rain gardens catch stays here to irrigate our landscape and stays out of Four Mile Run, the Potomac River, and the Chesapeake Bay.

Still, neighbors might respond that, like good service animals, our rain gardens are valued most by those who are blind. As the photos of the rain garden in North Fairlington's Ward 6 show, it is a marked contrast to the clipped shrubs and green expanses we are accustomed to seeing. Because our rain gardens are planted with native perennial plants that are adapted to sometimes soggy conditions, they can be beautiful in summer and fall when they are in bloom and attracting songbirds, butterflies, and hummers. But in early spring, when the rains are heavy and most of the plants are still dormant, some neighbors complain that the effect can be downright ugly.



North Fairlington's Ward 6 rain garden in September 2013, right after installation



The same rain garden in early May 2014, the day after a heavy rain

Arlington County, which is under pressure from state regulations to reduce its flow of pollutants into the Chesapeake, sees inner beauty instead. Storm water runoff is a major source of pollution, especially in urban areas. Every rain sends many thousands of gallons of water across roadways, parking lots, and turf areas, where it picks up oil, chemicals, silt, and debris before rushing into drains. In fact, Arlington’s StormwaterWise Landscapes Program has provided \$3,000 in matching funds for construction of two of our rain gardens (behind 2854 S. Columbus Street and 3052 S. Abingdon Street) and granted another \$3,000 match for a new rain garden (adjacent to 4858 28th Street S.). The only rain garden in South Fairlington, which is a catchment for the area surrounding Fairlington Community Center, was constructed and is maintained entirely at county expense.

Rain Garden Locations

Fairlington Villages

- 3069 S. Buchanan Street (Ward 2)
- 2854 S. Columbus Street (Ward 6)
- 4875 S. 28th Street (Ward 4)
- 3052 S. Abingdon Street (Ward 2)
- 4836 S. 29th Street (Ward 5)

Fairlington Community Center

- 3308 S. Stafford Street

With all but one of the rain gardens located in North Fairlington, the spot where complaints and complements tend to collect and percolate is the Fairlington Villages Grounds Committee, chaired by David Rose. The May 12 meeting included a lively discussion with an unhappy neighbor, Lynne Richardson, who urged that the rain garden pictured here be dismantled. Committee members, who mostly support the concept of rain gardens and have seen other ones on the grounds grow and improve in appearance over time, urged patience and promised some remediation. As Rob Wasowsky, a committee member, counseled, “We take this complaint

seriously, and we want to make this rain garden look nicer throughout the seasons. . . . We want to make it a showcase of good stewardship.” Members of the committee will work with Mark Johnson, Operations Manager, to devise a landscaping plan that will add more plantings in and around the rain garden.

Carol Rosen, Member, Grounds Committee