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Rain Gardens: More Than Meets the Eye

Our North Fairlington landscape is now home to six rain gardens. 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 runoff during heavy rains. 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. 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 Ward 6 show, it is a marked contrast to the clipped shrubs and green expanses we are accustomed to seeing around Fairlington. 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.



Left: North Fairlington's Ward 6 rain garden in September 2013, right after installation. Right: The same rain garden in early May 2014, the day after a heavy rain.

But there is more to a rain garden than meets the eye. Beneath the surface plantings lie 24 inches or more of gravel to promote drainage within 24 hours. That requirement for quick drainage means water is filtered and dispersed underground, but does not stagnate and create a breeding ground for mosquitoes. Mosquitoes prefer to lay their eggs in small, stagnant containers of water, such as birdbaths and pans under planters. It takes 24-48 hours for eggs to hatch and after hatching the mosquito larva must live in water for 7-12 days. Rain gardens are not friendly habitat for mosquitoes!

Arlington County, which is under pressure from state regulations to reduce its flow of pollutants into the Chesapeake, sees the inner beauty of rain gardens. 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 about \$7,000 in matching funds for construction of our rain gardens.

Rain Gardens in Fairlington Villages

- 3069 S. Buchanan Street (Ward 2)
- 3052 S. Abingdon Street (Ward 2)
- 4875 S. 28th Street (Ward 4)
- 4858 S. 28th Street (Ward 4)
- 4836 S. 29th Street (Ward 5)
- 2854 S. Columbus Street (Ward 6)

Carol Rosen, Member, Grounds Committee