Rain Gardens:

They Need Maintenance Too!

Rain gardens are defined as landscaped areas planted with native species designed to soak up stormwater runoff from roofs, driveways, and lawns. Similar to your typical vegetable garden, a rain garden needs maintenance and care too. Aside from the pleasing aesthetics resulting in caring for your rain garden, maintaining also keeps it functional in controlling stormwater runoff.

Rain Garden Maintenance:

1. Caring for the Plants

Trimming: Overgrown vegetation in a rain garden is controlled through trimming and pruning. It is important to remember that mowing a rain garden is not recommended. Pruning of trees should occur in the winter or before late-March. Flowering plants should be pruned immediately after they have finished blooming, typically in the fall.

Weeding: Like any other garden, weeds can take over within the first few years of planting. Using non-chemical methods such as hand pulling and hoeing are recommended.

Watering: During the first year, plants should be watered at least once a week or more especially during hot, dry periods. After plants become established, watering is only necessary during drought conditions. For information on invasives go to PA DCNR's Invasive Species Database Search.

Fertilizing: The plants chosen for a rain garden are designed to absorb excess nitrogen and phosphorus that is typically comprised in stormwater runoff. As a result, fertilizing a rain garden will not be necessary.

Replanting: Not every plant will survive when first planting the rain garden. Making sure your rain garden is lush with vegetation is important in controlling stormwater runoff. Replanting should take place during cool weather; i.e. early to mid-fall or spring. However, trees can be planted anytime when the ground is not frozen. Not any kind of plant or tree can be replanted, a rain garden is designed with carefully selected species that can handle variable water levels, exposure to sun and/or shade and soil types. Therefore, it's important to replant using the same or similar species.

2. Mulching

Mulching is a vital part of a rain garden by means of preventing grass from growing, controlling weeds, reducing soil compaction, and preserving soil moisture. Rain gardens should have little to no grass, therefore eliminating the practice of mowing. The mulch layer should be 2 to 3 inches thick and composed of shredded or chipped hardwood mulch.

3. Trash and Debris Removal

Stormwater runoff carries trash and debris which can enter into the rain garden. It is important to keep the stormwater BMP free of these pollutants which could harm the plants or create drainage blockages. Inspecting the rain garden after major storm events (>1 inch in cumulative rainfall) for trash and debris will prevent it from failing.

4. Ponding Problems

Unlike vegetable gardens, rain gardens are designed to endure standing water during storm events. If a rain garden is constantly holding water for longer than 24 hours then the facility may not be properly functioning. Contacting the contractor who installed the rain garden or an engineer is highly recommended if this occurs.

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