

Hold back the rain

Scientists hold rain garden workshops to educate public

When it comes to rainfall, this summer was a doozy in northern Minnesota – some 15 inches of rain fell in June, July and August. Combined with the area’s clay soils and steep slopes, a lot of people were seeing pools gathering in their yards, or worse, in their basements.

“Water will go where it can,” says Valerie Brady, NRRF aquatic scientist. “The best we can do is encourage it to go where we want it and away from where it will cause problems.”

A very effective, and lovely, way to do that is with a rain garden. Properly designed, it will capture and hold water that runs off roofs, driveways and lawns, filtering pollutants and letting the stormwater slowly absorb into the earth.

“During big rain events, stormwater runoff from neighborhoods and streets can overburden nearby streams causing the banks to erode, making the water muddy and filling the streambed with dirt,” said Brady. “A rain garden can hold back hundreds of gallons of water.”

Brady explained that her own property generated over 2,500 gallons of stormwater runoff during a one-inch rain storm. She captures as much as she can with rain barrels and rain gardens.

“In a typical rain storm, a house roof alone will generate hundreds of gallons of runoff,” said Brady. “That doesn’t even count the garage, driveway, yard... You get the picture. It’s a lot of water.”

To educate Duluth residents on how to build rain gardens, Brady teamed up with Minnesota Sea Grant and the City of Duluth to hold workshops in June and August. The workshops were a combination of classroom, touring

blooming rain gardens, and then lending a hand to build one.

Peggy Donahue lives in Duluth’s Woodland neighborhood and she’s had a wet basement this year. She had been thinking about putting in a rain garden, but needed the know-how.

“I thought I knew where to put it, right where the water was pooling up,” said Donahue. “But now I won’t put it there. I learned the right placement.”

She will choose a location that’s a low spot on her lawn, but that drains water naturally, at least 15 feet away from her foundation. She also learned how to choose plants that survive droughts to drenching.

Kenwood neighborhood resident Delores Grunwald also appreciated learning about stormwater and the university research being done in Duluth. She wants to build a rain garden at her church and said the workshop was “definitely worthwhile and very interesting.”

University of Minnesota Extension Educator Eleanor Burkett, who taught the classroom portion of the workshop, said that the partnership approach of the workshops was key.

“That’s what it really takes. A community coming together to do their part to keep excessive stormwater from degrading the streams,” she said. “When people understand the science, it’s not an abstract concept anymore. They asked really good questions.”

More information on rain gardens can be found at LakeSuperiorStreams.org/toolkit or through Minnesota Sea Grant at www.seagrants.umn.edu.



Participants learn how to build a rain garden.



Valerie Brady (left) plants vegetation during the workshop.