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## Longswamp Township holds workshop teaching about creating spaces that help conserve water, attract wildlife

By Lisa Scheid

Reading Eagle

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**Jenny Freeby of Mertztown, left, and Consuelo Almodovar of Allentown take part in a rain garden workshop.**

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Rain gardens help conserve water and attract birds and other wildlife. And, really, they aren't very complicated to start.

That's what a group of 10 people from Berks and Lehigh counties learned recently at a Longswamp Township workshop. Funded with a \$5,000 grant from the Pennsylvania League of Women Voters as a Water Resources Education Network project, the workshop brought in experts to the rural Berks County community to give tips and advice on rain gardens, according to Kate Harms, an organizer.

Longswamp, which has the only Audubon Society recognized Birdtown in Berks County, has an environmental advisory committee that looks for ways to encourage best conservation practices in the community.

What is a rain garden?

It's a gully with flowers, plants, even bushes or trees that thrive with lots of water. It's not a swamp, though there may be times it gets a little muddy. As engineer Jason Smith of Hanover Engineering Associates in Bethlehem, Lehigh County, explained, you can think of a rain garden as a lovely way to manage stormwater runoff and reduce impervious surface. Don't let the engineering talk scare you; home rain gardens can be organically created and don't need elaborate engineering and calculations to be beautiful and successful.

**Why a rain garden?**

Oh, the list is really long. Here are some top reasons from engineer Jason Smith and Steve Saffier, the Audubon Society's Audubon at Home coordinator:

- You can incorporate into your lawn: It's a nice complement to a manicured lawn.
- It attracts wildlife and birds, which makes your property interesting and enjoyable.
- It needs less maintenance than your lawn: no chemicals, no mowing.
- It decreases the amount of debris and chemical-laden stormwater that runs into streams.

- It increases the water table, gives you richer soil.
- Depending on the size, your aesthetics, the plants and how natural you let it become, a rain garden can be cheaper than a lawn to maintain.
- Some people use them to manage basement and property water problems.

### **Where do I start?**

There are a few rules of thumb for a successful rain garden. Using these tips, you can start to think about where to put your rain garden, Smith said, no calculations required.

- Consider how it looks from the road as well as the view from your home.
- It should be no closer to your home than 10 feet.
- Keep it away from any in-ground septic system and underground lines. Be sure to call PA One Call (8-1-1 or [www.pa1call.org/PA811/Public/](http://www.pa1call.org/PA811/Public/)) before you start digging.
- It can be anywhere from 100 to 300 square feet wide, even wider but shallower, depending on the drainage of the soil and location.
- If you want it near a slope, you'll need a bigger area to soak up the runoff.
- A flatter location can be smaller.
- The length of the garden should be perpendicular to the slope of the land.
- It should be sloped to a depth between 8 to 10 inches. The ratio of sloped sides to depth of the garden should be no more than 2:1.
- When digging, use the removed soil to level the garden and make a berm around it.

### **Which plants?**

This is the fun part. Feel free to do a sketch. Select a mix of grasses, sedges, rushes and flowers. You'll want native plants, so just don't simply run out to the garden center. To discover your options, check out a few websites (see resources list) so you have some ideas what is native to Pennsylvania and what isn't. You'll also want to consider plants of varied height and perennial flowers you can clump together. Select at least three species of shrubs and trees, because if one species won't take to the garden, you have a better chance with the other species. Fall is the best time to plant the trees.

### **How do I maintain it?**

Mowing is not necessary. You'll need to weed it for the first two seasons, Smith said. Give your plants time to grow in dense. How natural or groomed it looks is up to you, but you'll want to weed out unwelcome growth until your selected plants grow in. Leave it alone over the winter. In the spring you can remove tattered plants if you want. After a few seasons, your plants will out-compete the weeds.

Understand that all native plants will sustain some damage from insects, said Audubon's Saffier. That's good, actually. Insects bring birds who need to feed their hungry young. Think about plants as part of a community or an ecosystem. Insects are largely inconspicuous but they are crucial to a successful rain garden.

### **What about rain barrels?**

Rain barrels are an excellent way to conserve water but not necessary for a rain garden. You can gather water runoff from the roof of your house or garage and use it to water your gardens or plants. In an emergency, Harms said, she's used the barrel water to flush toilets.

Often people who have one rain barrel like it so much they add more. Start with one. There are some simple designs online and look to conservation organizations for a good deal on recycled containers. Harms recommends food grade barrels but other sources that have been well-cleaned can be used as well. Harms does not recommend using rain barrel water for drinking, cooking or bathing.

### Resources for making a rain garden

- [pa.audubon.org](http://pa.audubon.org)
- [raingardenalliance.org](http://raingardenalliance.org)
- [wren.palwv.org/RainGardensandRainBarrels.html](http://wren.palwv.org/RainGardensandRainBarrels.html)
- [pabirdplants.org](http://pabirdplants.org)
- [Ernstseed.org](http://Ernstseed.org)
- [berkscd.com/watersheds/rain-barrels/](http://berkscd.com/watersheds/rain-barrels/)

### About Longswamp Township's rain garden

- Where: 1112 State St., Mertztown, PA 19539. You can find the garden at the end of the parking lot behind the township building.
- Designed by: Gary Campbell, [www.campbellandscape.com](http://www.campbellandscape.com), 610-967-9011. Built by township volunteers and township environmental advisory committee

Contact Lisa Scheid: [life@readingeagle.com](mailto:life@readingeagle.com).



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Camilla Mallomee of Longswamp Township plants as workshop participants created a rain garden near the Longswamp Township building.

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Camilla Mallomee of Longswamp Township, left, and Jenny Freeby pink shirt of Mertzown help create a rain garden in Longswamp Township.

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A sign details the benefits of a rain garden.

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Camilla Mallomee of Longswamp Township, from left, Jenny Freeby of Mertzown, Kate Harms of Longswamp Township, Michele Vandevender of Fleetwood, and Consuelo Almodovar of Allentown help create a rain garden near the Longswamp Township building.

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Michele Vandevender of Fleetwood lays out plants for the rain garden.

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