

Raingardens and Native Plantings

Observations and opportunities: South Washington County, MN

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Funding Provided by the Center for Urban Research and Affairs, University of Minnesota



 Focus Group Research from the Washington County Conservation District, East Metro Water Resource Education, June-September 2008

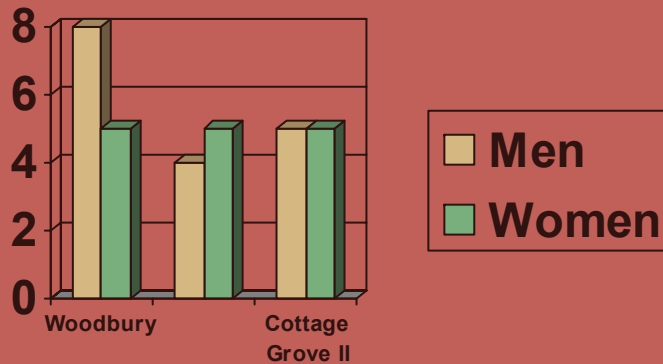
Research Objectives:



- Identify barriers to the use of rain gardens and native plantings in Southern Washington County, Woodbury, Cottage Grove, St. Paul Park, and Newport, Minnesota
- Determine if the outreach and publications of the Blue Thumb program (www.bluethumb.org-promoting improved water quality through rain gardens, native plantings and shoreline stabilization) were reaching a targeted group
- Assess level of interest or concern about surface water quality in area lakes and rivers
- Identify raingarden and native landscaping locations in area and get input from focus groups

Background Information

Composition of focus
Groups: men and
women



Washington County:

Males:
99,970 (49.7%)

Females:
101,160 (50.3%)

County population in
2003: 214,054
Jobs in 2003: 75,936*

*Courtesy of http://www.city-data.com/county/Washington_County-MN.html



Methodology

- Focus groups set up based on recommendations of Richard A. Krueger's in: Focus Groups, A Practical Guide For Applied Research, 2nd Edition
- Targeted individuals were telephoned with a brief explanation of the goals of the participating organizations. Instead of random calls to area homeowners, **residents and/or people who worked in the target area AND volunteered in the communities in some capacity were identified and solicited for participation in focus group research, July-August, 2008**
- Conducted three focus group listening sessions; two in Cottage Grove and one in Woodbury, MN

Focus Group Structure

- A brief summary: how did we find the participants, who were they, why did they participate, what questions did we ask?
- Group sizes ranged from 5 or 6 to 16. 9-10 was best.
- One moderator, one recorder/greeter
- Slides of native landscaping and raingardens (both commercial and residential) were shown
- Questions were asked about water quality, plantings and impressions of the slides to encourage discussion and input (this was scripted before the focus groups were held)
- Blue Thumb program was explained and their promotional materials shared
- The Blue Thumb Guide to Raingardens by Rusty Schmidt, David Dods, and Dan Shaw was given out during the meeting as a “thank you” for attending the focus group

- Bankers
- Educators
- Small business owners
- Consultants
- Retirees
- Property Managers (medical, malls, larger companies)
- Counselors/Ministry
- Realtors
- Architect, General Contractor
- Service Companies, Insurance
- Community Volunteers/Advocates

What did they have in common:

Live and/or worked in Woodbury, Cottage Grove, Newport or St. Paul Park, MN (all in Southern Washington County, MN)

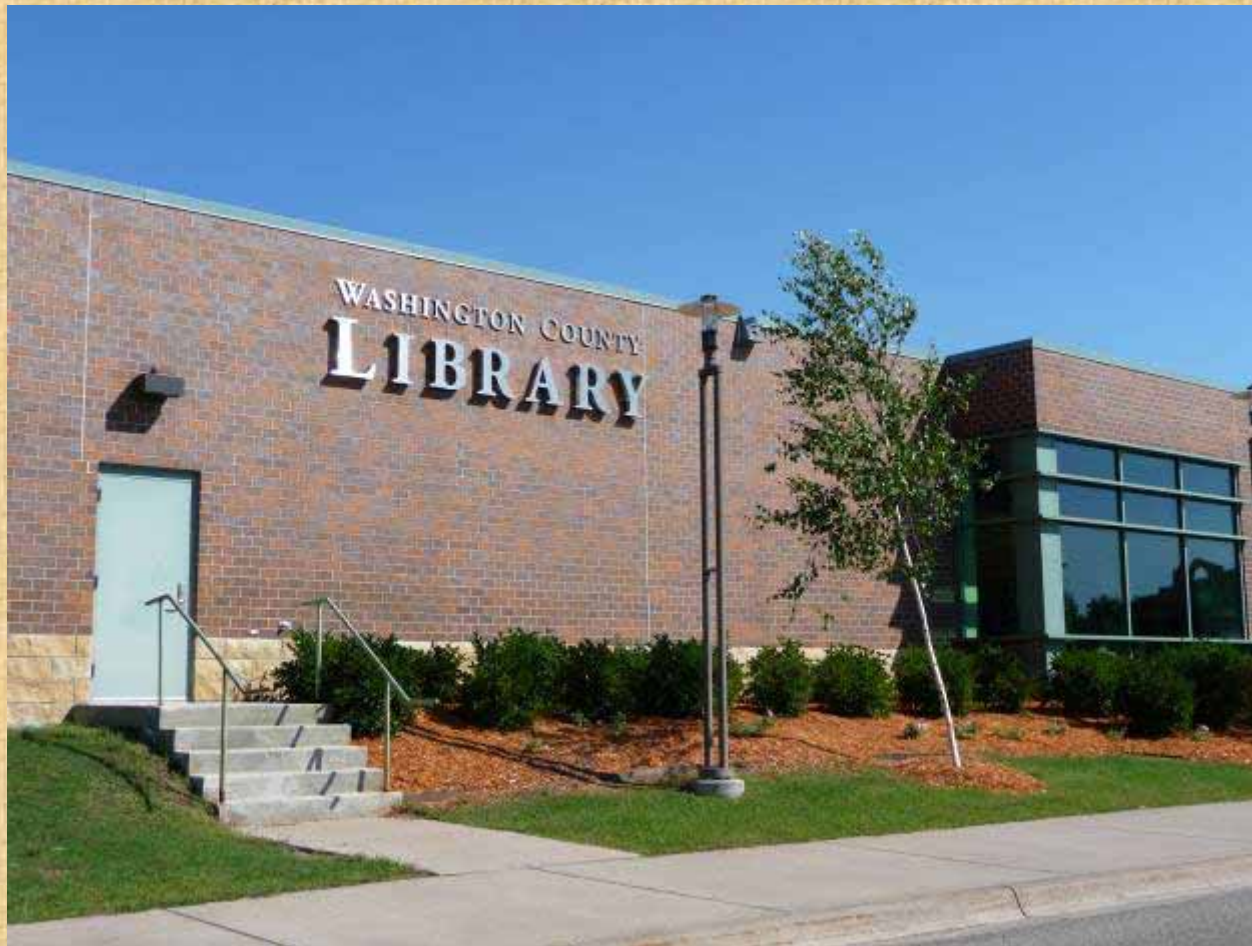
Identified as active as a volunteer in the community e.g.: Advisory Committees for the City, Rotary Club, Chamber of Commerce, Foundation Board of Directors, Lions Club, Garden Club, Arts Board

No representatives from age groups 18-25 or 75+ (but each group had one or two retiree's).

Participants were from small businesses, large businesses, educational institutions, religious institutions, agencies, and professional offices.



Conducted focus groups at noon at local library meeting rooms, 1.25 hours per session, box lunches provided.



Are people concerned about water quality?

- “I’m interested in water quality.”
- “I’m concerned about our drinking water quality issues”.
- “As a sportsman, somebody that actively seeks out large pieces of water to go fishing and scuba diving, water clarity is a big deal.”
- **“...with some of issues we have in high density urban environments, water is going to become the new oil. The fact that we are already legislating to protect the Great Lakes from regions that have overdrawn their water supplies -this kind of concept [*water conservation*] has to be brought forward.”**
- “*We take the water for granted in this part of the country.*”
- “I’ve heard a couple of things that people were mentioning about water quality concerns in recent years and drinking water quality.”





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CREATE A RAINGARDEN

Do you worry that pollutants from fertilizers, pesticides, streets, and rooftops are contaminating your lakes and rivers? Do heavy rains collect in pools and puddles in your yard? The easiest way to help water infiltrate into the ground rather than run off into storm sewers is by creating a raingarden. Strategically place your raingarden on a site that will intercept water runoff. If constructed properly, the garden will drain the water within two days. Printable raingarden plans or consult your local [nursery](#) for plant options.

[Native Plant Selector](#)

[U.W. Extension's How-To Raingarden Manual](#) (pdf)

[Native Plant Brochure](#) (pdf)

[MPCA Plants for Stormwater Design](#)



Raingardens

Blue Thumb or raingarden recognition levels: Low

Blue Thumb Program: a total of two people have heard of it. A third person wondered it was part of the Conservation District.

Raingardens: five people have heard of them.



Sample slides shown:



Garden from:
Rice Creek Watershed District





City of Burnsville
Designed by: Barr Engineering



AFTER





City of Burnsville

8. 2. 2004

Designed by: Barr Engineering



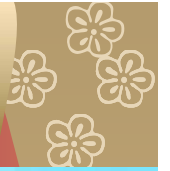


Designed & Installed by:
Energyscapes



Designed by:
Savanna Designs

City of Burnsville
Designed by: Barr Engineering



More raingarden photos were shown to participants:



Question from Moderator: When you are looking at these [raingardens], what are you thinking?

- **Woodbury participant:** “When I look at this and there are wildflowers then wow, it’s ok, but not when it looks more like grass that hasn’t been mowed with weeds. Then it’s getting like “Oh, I can’t see it!” It looks like a lot of weeds to me.”






Business Site with native planting

Perceptions of landscaping



 **Quote from Participant:**

 ***“Especially around businesses, we don’t think about the fact that they did it [used native landscaping] on purpose. We’re so used to seeing the well-manicured areas.”***





Least favorite slide!



“To me it isn’t adding to the environment or to that area. It’s not adding anything- it just **looks** like a lot of weeds, to me, as a resident. Like, what are you trying to do there?”





Comment from focus group



“It [native planting] kind of goes from looking great to looking like a weed bed, depending on what seasonal aspect you’re dealing with, therein lies the conundrum of that landscaping.”

-Woodbury participant



A “well-manicured” landscape=attractive to many people, creating resistance to the use of native plantings and less formal raingardens!!!

“...any decently developed urban area, I mean green lawns and things-Woodbury is Woodbury. It would be different if we were living in some small town out in the country in terms of what a nice green lawn is supposed to look like. I water and don’t have any qualms about it because I don’t have any alternative. If I want to have nice green grass, you know?”

...”we’ve all been trained to have these manicured putting greens for lawns.”

**Cottage Grove participant responding to slides:
“They’re not manicured..”**



Photos with flowering plants were more popular

- **“A prairie garden in a residential setting is a harder one to sustain. Echinacea and Black-eyed Susans are showy, but not all of the plants are.”**
- Other participant: “I think that when they [*wildflower areas*] have flowering of some sort it helps. This one [slide showing native grasses] to me, oh gosh, looks more like weeds.”





Seasonal Interest: Summer ok, Fall, Spring and Winter, not so thrilling




“One of the things I see when I look at the residences [*raingardens and native plantings shown on slides*]-you have to get a whole neighborhood to buy into this -not individual people. If my neighbor planted his yard like that and I’ve got my nice green lawn, the guy right across the street does... I wouldn’t be too happy with it. It isn’t going to be a thing of beauty anymore. Also, it’s looking very nice at the time these pictures are taken (slide had native summer blooming perennials on it) too, but you’ve got spring and fall...”

Maintenance concerns

 Jill: “At first glance some look like they need to mow!”

 Bill: “Interesting, going down highway 61, I’ve noticed some of these plantings that don’t look so great. Those raingardens that are not maintained ...look bad.”

 Other participant: “From a design standpoint getting everybody in, to buy into it (*raingardens and native plantings*) in a cohesive fashion and then maintain it is an issue.”

More maintenance concerns:

- “These detention ponds and things that are designed to catch the runoff from yards and that type of thing. It’s almost like nobody consulted anybody on what should be planted there because some of them look absolutely terrible.”
- **“Keep them neat.”**
- “Wedgewood was a brand new course here in Woodbury and it was very nicely developing, then somebody bought it out, and they let it go natural for two years and the first year it sounded like a good idea. But it looked like heck after two years and then all the residents around there put up a big stink. And now it’s back to this manicured beautiful area. So, there’s got to be some kind of balance... if you let that go and the weeds are there the next year and it’s not maintained, it is an eyesore and most people won’t want to tolerate or live next door to it.”



Spring, Fall and non-forbs:

■ “I’ve seen some of these, that when blooming they look very nice, but when they aren’t blooming they look pretty weedy. I think that’s part of the problem, the in-betweens.”

■ “You wouldn’t put it all in your front yard. And like you said, to have somebody plant it, and then somebody else has a well-groomed yard. You’re not going to put that in the front, it’s got to be in an area where there is probably not a whole lot of traffic.”



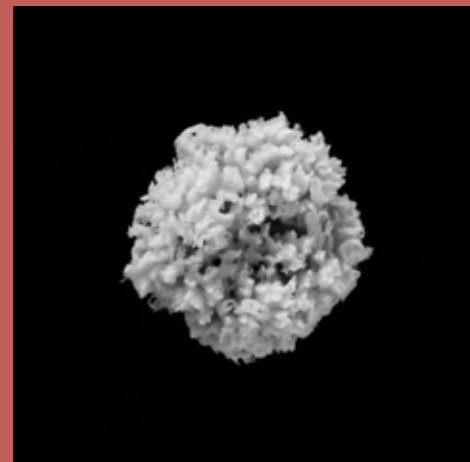
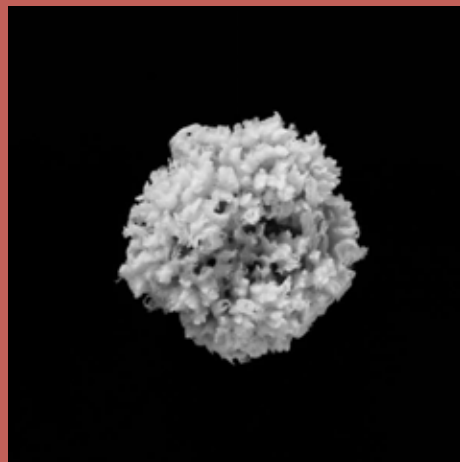
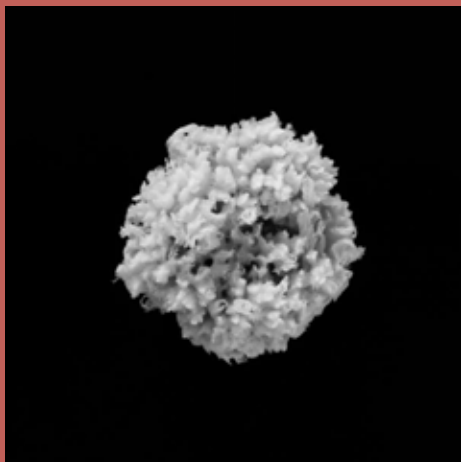
Aggregate barrier comments:



- The objections to the look of native plantings/raingardens around the community-not flowering all season/no color in spring/little color in fall/weedy/design plan not obvious or attractive/not manicured/look unkempt.**

Tell people what your planting is trying to achieve:

- “I have a suggestion that maybe in some of these native plant areas, you do sign them, somehow. You go by them and it looks like an unmaintained area, they ought to clean it up. Then, you put a sign on it that says, “Natives” and then [people] say, “Oh, that’s neat!”
- **“If there were cute signs, like, “Native Sponge”, or “Protecting Your Environment”-it would be good.”**
- “Sign them; you can sell it that way. Everybody would accept that.”



Sample sign from Washington County Fairgrounds- Demonstration Raingardens

Native Perennial Rain Garden

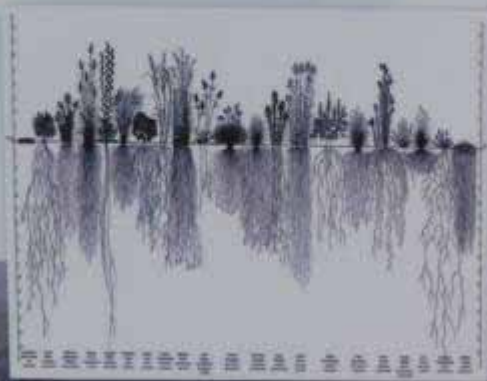


Illustration provided by Heidi Natura
of the Conservation Research Institute

Why choose native plants?

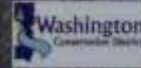
- Once established, native plants need little watering and no fertilizers or pesticides.
- Plants native to Minnesota provide food and shelter for birds and butterflies.
- The deep roots of prairie flowers and grasses prevent erosion, absorb water and decrease soil compaction better than traditional lawn grasses.



How a rain garden works:

1. Down spouts direct water from your roof to the garden.
2. Berms keep the water within the garden and prevent overflowing.
3. Deep roots absorb water and help it penetrate the soil.
4. Water is completely absorbed within 48 hours.

For the nitty gritty numbers and facts about rain gardens
check out the next garden to the left.



Moderator: Where do you need help to consider installing raingardens?

- “Free designs, knowing what plants to plant...the design thing, if you have to hire an engineer....”
- “Free money is good. Grants!”
- “*Someone to come help me take care of it!*”
- “If somebody could just come out to look at the property and say, “You could do this and this and this”, instead of having somebody who comes out to sell you something.”
- “Just knowing what to plant, what the different options are. If you are going to re-do something, you might have to have a landscape plan to move forward with a project... Well, knowing what are the right things to plant and where to put them would go a long way.”



Positive observations about benefits of native plant landscaping:

- “It makes it look like a bit of country in the city. We’re getting so big and it’s changing so much. To be able to drive down your road and see something like that, it keeps you grounded to the country way of life.”
–Participant referring to native plantings




Rapid changes in land use in the area:



Small city and urban living are rapidly joining together in Woodbury/Cottage Grove/St. Paul Park and Newport, MN



Mixed Messages

 “I thought it was kind of ironic that as soon as they came out with these issues and raising prices for the amount of usage [*water for homes*] that the City of Woodbury would change the landscaping on Valley Creek Road and add a watering system to try to water grass instead of maybe plants that are natural to the area or something like that. So there are issues out there.”
Woodbury Focus Group participant



Design and Maintenance

Public or large commercial sites, golf courses:

- Signage is crucial, if you are planning a large native planting or runoff-reduction project-tell the public why it is there*
- Add more design features, sweeps of plants, seed mixes may need to be tailored to projects*
- *Design additional **spring, early summer and winter interest** .*

Homeowner Associations for homes/condos/townhouses

- Owners and management companies may need individualized presentations and guidance to reduce large mowed lawn areas and change restrictive covenants. Homeowners use covenants as a reason to maintain status quo.

Strip malls cared for by maintenance companies


- Individual businesses may have little input into the landscape and maintenance process.

Concerns about project costs

- *“From a development standpoint it becomes a costly attribute [adding native plant landscapes and prairies]”.*
- *“The major residential issue is cost...”*
- *“The biggest obstacle is always going to be price [of a prairie project/raingarden, etc.] vs. maintenance, even when you’re underpinning some of the costs [with grants]”.*



Other Take-aways:

 “This is purely an opinion; commercial developments will be easier to crack than residential. It is much easier to get those types of features into a corporate [*setting*]; the connotation of being green is good for the *corporate image*.” –Woodbury general contractor

Regarding water conservation:

“Pay it now
or pay for it
later!”-
Cottage Grove
participant



Water Use: Legislate, Reward or Assess?

- “Build it [*requirements for raingardens and water conservation*] into the [*building*] codes, otherwise the additional cost of doing it will prevent it from being used, especially in new development. You could do a property tax credit of \$100”.
- “Maybe you can cut water usage by penalties on your water bill.”
- **Better yet, maybe you can create incentives on your water bill for those who plant raingardens. Like the credit for recycling on your garbage bill.**
- “How expensive water is-if water bill goes up, big lawns will cost more!”



In closing:

“My experience suggests self- interest is the key. What excites me, I’ll do.”

-Woodbury Focus group participant:

Thank you! -Angie Hong and
Kay Qualley, WCCCD, CURA

