



BEAUTIFUL, HARD WORKING  
**RAIN  
GARDENS**

**AN OUTREACH & COMMUNICATIONS HOW-TO GUIDE**



# SO, YOU WANT TO BUILD A RAIN GARDEN?

If you are reading this, you are intrigued by the idea of organizing a rain garden or other green infrastructure project. Congratulations! Whether you're interested in home rain gardens, a community project at a school or park, or collaborating with a government partner on a public project, green infrastructure installations beautify yards and neighborhoods. Plus, the installations are key to preventing polluted runoff and protecting local rivers, streams and other bodies of water.

With your help, we can keep our iconic waters clean and our communities thriving.

# WHY A GUIDE?

By nature, rain gardens are highly visible community projects. We have seen in striking ways how they can bring neighborhoods together. We have also seen how they can cause neighborhood conflicts if planners and coordinators don't take the right steps to seek community support and address concerns up front. This guide builds on the lessons learned from the projects that did get bad press and community pushback, as well as the success stories. It includes best outreach practices, effective messaging and troubleshooting.

## 5 STEPS TO A SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY RAIN GARDEN PROJECT

**UNDERSTAND  
YOUR COMMUNITY**

**DEVELOP  
YOUR MESSAGE**

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## BUT, BEFORE YOU BEGIN

A quick reality check. While green infrastructure may be something you are passionate about, don't expect to convince everyone to become a rain garden advocate. Recognize the fact that most people will never be as excited about the project as you — and that's ok! The reality is you only need to recruit a small number of people to be successful. For the rest of the community, it's about gaining passive support.

**NOTE** This is a community outreach guide, NOT a technical guide to building and designing green infrastructure. There are plenty of good technical resources available at [resource-media.org/raingardens](http://resource-media.org/raingardens)

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## UNDERSTAND YOUR COMMUNITY

First and foremost, organizing a rain garden project is about community building. Spend time reaching out and getting to know the people that will need to support, or at least not oppose, your effort in order for it to be a success.

- Who are they?
- What do they care about?
- Why would a rain garden project benefit them, based on their values?

To answer these questions, tap into existing neighborhood networks. Identify places where the community comes together: community centers, schools, churches and other religious centers, grocery stores, coffee shops and other businesses. Plan to spend a lot of time talking to people and identifying the best forums, such as neighborhood meetings, at which to present your plan.

This is also the time to identify what, if any, digital and media tools exist to help neighbors stay in touch with one another and track neighborhood news. Email listservs, Facebook pages and Nextdoor sites are increasingly common, as are hyperlocal media: neighborhood newspapers and newsletters, as well as blogs and localized websites such as Patch.

## **HOW PEOPLE VIEW GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE**

Research has shown that the public is more inclined to support green infrastructure as a way to prevent pollution than as a way of restoring polluted waters. People respond most positively if rain gardens are framed as a way of greening yards, beautifying communities and preventing flooding while keeping pollution out of the water.

## **BUILD YOUR NETWORK**

The early days of a project can feel lonely. Fortunately, there is an emerging community of public agencies, neighborhood groups and rain garden advocates that would love to hear about and, if possible, support your effort. At [resource-media.org/raingardens](http://resource-media.org/raingardens) you will find many names and organizations involved with rain gardens in the Pacific Northwest.

## **UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL & LANGUAGE DIFFERENCES**

Traditional opinion research generally fails to adequately account for the variations in cultural values present in minority communities, particularly those with a large immigrant population.

For example, members of Seattle's East African community tend to be uncomfortable divulging their contact information to the government due to the legacy of corruption in some African countries. Working with a trusted member of the community who can serve as a government liaison can be one way to address this problem.



## DEVELOP YOUR MESSAGE

Think about your message from the perspective of what your audience needs to hear, rather than what you want to tell. Good messages capture the heart — not just the minds — of your audience. When “pitching” your idea to the community, the message must revolve around the benefits of the completed project. By this time, you will know more than we do about your community and what they value most.

There are four main reasons people decide to install, or participate in the installation of, a green infrastructure project. The benefits are (in order of popularity):

**Beautify your yard and neighborhood** Most surveys reveal that homeowners want rain gardens for one simple reason: they’re beautiful. Even the most dedicated rain garden owners installed their gardens because they brighten up the yard and increase their property values, NOT because they want to clean up local waters, which generally speaking is a secondary concern even for likely supporters.



**Prevent flooding and puddles** In many cases, green infrastructure can help deal with persistent flooding or puddling. And for those that live with flooding and puddling, that is a HUGE selling point.

**Incentives** If you have incentives or rebates to offer, make sure people know!

**Help the environment by keeping more pollution out of the water** Focus on local water. Lead with prevention. Talk about keeping pollution out of the water instead of trying to convince people that it's already dirty. Not everyone knows how polluted their local waters are, but everyone wants to keep it as clean as possible. Using this message will ensure that audiences can understand what they're seeing, and not run aground on a claim they don't believe.





## LANGUAGE — WHICH WORDS AND TERMS TO USE, AND WHICH TO AVOID

We've learned a lot about what words and terms people understand and get a positive response, and those that are confusing or misleading.

DON'T USE	INSTEAD TRY
Stormwater	Polluted runoff
Low Impact Development (LID)	Green infrastructure
Bioretention	Natural filter
Depression	Natural filter
Ecosystem services	Nature's benefits

## SAMPLE VALUES-BASED MESSAGE

A rain garden is a beautiful landscape feature in your yard that captures and filters polluted runoff from your rooftop, driveway and other impervious surfaces. Rain gardens prevent flooding, increase home value, and create habitat for birds and butterflies.

## OTHER MESSAGE POINTERS

**What rain gardens do** Don't explain what a rain garden is. Instead, talk about what a rain garden does: it brightens up yards, provides a home for birds and butterflies, and helps keep polluted runoff out of local waterways. Rain gardens are a very new concept for most people, so it doesn't make sense to get into the details of the recipe. Instead, present the fully baked pie — a beautiful, functional addition to a yard or median.

**Make the human connection first** While many people are concerned about aquatic ecosystems, everyone wants a beautiful yard and cares about clean water that our families drink. Lead with beautification, health and safety benefits. You can always follow this up by explaining the benefits to the environment.

**Keep it local — and specific** When you talk about pollution, name the toxins that contaminate our water, say where they come from, and name familiar, local waterways where they'll end up.

**Don't oversell** Think about it like a first date. You want to be positive and engaging, but not desperate or overbearing. Come on too strong and you risk turning people off.

## VISUALS

**Show, don't tell** Humans are visual first, verbal second. The most persuasive argument you can make in support of your project will be a picture of a beautiful, fully functioning example — preferably one with smiling people included. Check out [resource-media.org/raingardens](http://resource-media.org/raingardens) for virtual tours and photos of existing projects.

**Explain visually** Follow up your photo of a beautiful, hard-working rain garden with an easy to understand graphic showing how it works. Verbal explanations of the processes are confusing and people tend to lose interest. Use graphics to explain, and save your words for talking about benefits!



## CHOOSE YOUR COMMUNICATIONS TOOLS

Decide what are going to be the most effective communications tools for you to use and get them ready. In most cases, low tech is your best bet. Peer-to-peer communications is the most effective way to secure support for your project, and you can start by reaching out to a master gardener at your county's extension office. Don't waste time on fancy digital tools if a simple, well-designed flyer is all you need.

Most projects fit into one of the following categories with associated outreach needs.

**Small-scale project** For example, one or two rain gardens on a single street: your most important tool is word of mouth. Be sure you've developed a catchy 4-5 sentence pitch that you can deliver on demand. Practice saying it in front of family, friends and the mirror until you have it perfected – then go out and spread the word.

**Medium-sized or neighborhood-scale project or cluster** For community sites such as schools or churches, you will want a similar “sales pitch” as well as a simple handout or flyer to post on bulletin boards. Also, refer back to any social networks (Facebook pages, email groups) you

identified in Step 1. If none exist, create your own. Select the proper tool based on what you know about the community: are they Facebook users? Do they use email?

**Larger scale projects with a government partner**

In addition to everything needed for small and medium-sized projects, consider developing an attractive brochure and fact sheet on rain gardens and/or green infrastructure. Refer to the local media you identified in Step 1 and be prepared to share these materials with them as needed — although be sure to check out The Role of Media in Step 5 first.

There are two other things you will want to have on hand before you begin your outreach campaign regardless of what kind it is:

**Have a list of nearby rain gardens** or other examples of the type of project you want to develop to share with people. Be sure to include addresses and, if necessary, a map and directions.

**Consider getting a sign** from a local agency to post at the site explaining what a rain garden is and why it is important.





## COMMUNITY OUTREACH

This is step four, not step one, but in many ways it is the whole point of your strategy; a step that can be energizing and fun IF you have put in the prep work. You know your community's character and values, and have developed a message to engage them. If the first thing community members hear about the project is "We're installing it this Saturday," you may have a problem. Plan to begin sharing information about the "why" and the "why here" of the project with residents several months before presenting them with any specifics on your effort.

Next, deliver your message: post your handout on community center bulletin boards, make an announcement at church, and/or host a neighborhood meeting.

## RECRUIT EVANGELISTS

While people generally have mixed feelings about the government and environmentalists, they tend to trust their neighbors. Leverage the energy of active supporters to sell the project for you, and use them as your spokespeople as much as possible. Be sure to reach out to allies at the organizations you identified in Step 1 for ideas and support.

## IN-PERSON MEETINGS

In order for your project to be successful over the long term, the installations will have to be maintained. Maintenance means buy-in. And buy-in has to come early. The only way to secure buy-in is to build community input into the plan. After announcing your goal for the project, convene the community — or an interested subset of it — to discuss what they are looking for. Even if you already have an idea for the what and where of your project, it is critical that you solicit community input BEFORE presenting a proposal. Even if you can't satisfy every request, it is critical to show an interest in hearing what the community wants and to make an honest effort to address their interests. Finally, when

the time comes to present the final plan, be transparent about what you heard, and what you were and were not able to include.

## TOURS

Remember the list of completed projects you identified and mapped out in Step 3? Keep that on hand, and if necessary organize a field trip with community members to allow them to experience examples first hand.

## SELECTING THE HOMES

In some residential rain garden projects you will find yourself with more homeowner demand than resources will allow you to meet — not everyone is going to get a rain garden, and you have to pick winners and losers. Often it will come down to topography and soil composition. But if all those technical factors are equal, consider this: If a person has a poorly maintained lawn, that's what their rain garden is going to look like. If you have a choice, pick homes with well-maintained yards.



## MAKE IT A COMMUNITY CELEBRATION

Finally, you're ready to install! This is yet another critical community outreach opportunity. Rain garden installations typically take one or two days to complete. Given how much time and effort you have invested, it makes sense to turn the installation into a celebration and a way to build a network of support. Don't hog the limelight. Use this as an opportunity to position the community members that participated in the project as the heroes of the day. Bring in food, include fun activities (especially for kids) and reinforce the community building dimension of the effort.



## MAINTENANCE

The final step is to negotiate for the long-term health of your new installation. Rain gardens are just like any other gardens, they require care and feeding. Maintenance can take a variety of forms: public utilities often oversee projects in the public right-of-way with the help of local residents. Private rain gardens are the responsibility of the homeowner. If you are planning to maintain it yourself, just buy a trowel, a hose and a kneepad. If your rain gardens are installed in a parking strip or other public place, you may be hoping to recruit members of the community to help with maintenance. And again, this will require them feeling a sense of ownership over the project.



## DEALING WITH THE UNPERSUADABLE

Inevitably you will encounter a community member who, despite your best efforts to highlight the benefits and cultivate a participatory environment, fails to buy in to the value of your project. In these situations it is important to remember one thing: you are not seeking to win these people over. Rather, you are seeking to prevent their disinterest from turning into opposition.

The best way to do this? Spend a lot of time with them, listening. Make it clear that you hear them and respect their position. The goal here is to satisfy their desire for respect and a voice in proceedings, even if they are ultimately overruled. Mostly, if they're heard and respected, opponents will sit on the sidelines. They won't participate, but they won't demonstrate against the project either. And that's success.



Maintaining a rain garden isn't labor intensive if you stay on top of it, but it becomes a lot of work if you let it pile up. Help homeowners understand the scale of the commitment and get them to sign a maintenance agreement. You don't want there to be any surprises later on. Another proven technique is to ask participating residents to contribute financially in some small way to help pay for the dirt and plants. Even if it is a token amount, this can cement their attachment to the project and ensure they will invest the time to maintain it.

To download the Stewardship Partners' new maintenance guide visit our website at [resource-media.org/raingardens](http://resource-media.org/raingardens).

## **THE ROLE OF MEDIA**

Hyper local media — neighborhood blogs, listservs, and community newspapers — can be valuable tools for spreading the word on workshops and other public events. Identifying and utilizing the event calendars offered at these outlets is smart. However, cultivating news coverage of a project before it is finished is asking for trouble.

We all want to spread the word on the importance of rain gardens. Yet journalists are storytellers, trained to populate their coverage with characters and describe the interplay between these characters. Reporters are trained to focus on conflict and tension, at the expense of harmony and collaboration. Conflict stories are popular with readers, and relatively easy to produce. As the old adage goes, “if it bleeds it leads.” And experience has shown that, without a foundation of community support that comes from seeing a project through and reaping the benefits, the most likely story that will emerge from these situations is a “he said-she said” back and forth between those who support the project and those who don’t. This is not helpful.

Rather, think of media as only for the narrow purpose of celebrating a job well done. Then the story is about community development and collaboration. And when you’re talking about the community’s success and the beautiful new gardens it has to enjoy, you can provide educational messages on why rain gardens are important, and how more communities can get involved. For more help on media relations, visit our website at [resource-media.org/raingardens](http://resource-media.org/raingardens).

**NOTE** While this guide is based on the experiences of advocates and practitioners in the Pacific Northwest, we believe the findings and recommendations are relevant to anyone championing rain gardens.

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## RAIN GARDEN RESOURCES

Please visit our website at [resource-media.org/raingardens](https://resource-media.org/raingardens) for a list of resources including:

- Example projects for field trips
- Technical assistance
- Organizations and existing programs
- Best practices using visuals

