

Have your garden, and save water, too

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By **STEPHANIE FOSNIGHT** for Pioneer Press

When it rains hard, droplets roll off David Husemoller and Peggy Wingo's driveway. And roof. And on the long stretches of lawn their two boys play on.

But instead of pouring down the slope of the back yard and into the alley, where the water would gather grease and oil and fertilizer runoff from the neighborhood before making its way into the sewers, the rain that rolls down this Grayslake property puddles in a dish-like garden at the edge of the yard.



David Husemoller created a rain garden and a pond in his Grayslake yard to conserve water.
(Joe Shuman/For Pioneer Press)

The native plants in the rain garden catch the water and soak it up, pulling the moisture deep into the earth with root systems that go down as far as 15 feet. In return, the plants thrive. Just now the garden is a mass of green, but soon it will be blooming in long successions of pink, white, purple, yellow and orange.

"In areas where we don't have water from Lake Michigan, we need to recharge the aquifers," said Husemoller, a native plant enthusiast who sells various local species at his EarthWild plant stand, open Saturdays in Prairie Crossings' Station Square.

Husemoller's rain garden is just one of several ways he has minimized how much water he needs to maintain his landscaping. Although northeastern Illinois is not in a drought, the groundwater supplies are still being replenished after several dry years, particularly the 2005 drought when almost every community enforced strict watering restrictions.

"There is a limited amount of water and the water we use is constantly being recycled, so we want to be careful with it," said Nancy Pollard, horticulture educator for the University of Illinois-Extension. "We don't want the water tables to continue to drop."

Conserving water outdoors also limits runoff of chemicals into waterways and helps prevent flooding in home basements.

"Another reason you want to use water wisely is because you pay for it," Pollard said.

Barrel of rain

North suburban residents are catching onto clever water-saving techniques, according to Mea Blauer of the Lake County Soil and Water Conservation District. She was flabbergasted but very

happy when the organization recently sponsored a rain barrel sale--and sold 472 rain barrels quicker than you can say "conserve."

"It was more than I ever dreamed we would sell," Blauer said. "Obviously, the demand is there."

Blauer still gets requests for rain barrels, so she directs residents to the Web site rainbarrelsandmore.com where, for about \$100, customers can buy a 50-gallon barrel that will collect water from the gutter and hold it for garden watering. A net over the top prevents mosquito larvae, and the gardener uses a spigot to siphon off water whenever necessary.

Blauer ordered two rain barrels for her own Waukegan yard and was surprised that they filled completely after just a few rains.

"I've been using it a little bit at a time to water my vegetable garden and I still have some left," she said. "I don't have to use my tap water."

90,000 gallons saved

While saving a few gallons of water here and there in your own yard might not seem like it makes a difference, Blauer calculated that if all of the rain barrels they sold get filled up a few times this season, the group of homeowners will save a total 90,000 gallons of water this year.

"Instead of having that water go into the storm sewer, you can actually keep that water on your property and replenish the groundwater," she said.

Husemoller was so pleased with his rain garden that he was inspired to take on another project after he realized his sump pump emptied out a few inches beyond his rain garden into the alley.

"I thought, 'Gee I'd like to catch that water,'" he said. "So I created a pond."

In May, Husemoller hired a professional to dig a 2-foot deep pond out of the hard clay in front of the rain garden. Now the groundwater collected by the sump pump drains into a pond and, if the pond gets too full, drains out the other end back into the alley.

Although his pond filled up after just a few storms, it has yet to drain back out of the yard at the other end.

"Instead of shooting it away, keep it in your yard," he said. Husemoller has high hopes for his little pond, from landscaping around the edges with more native plants to creating a warm, flat "sitting rock" and stocking the water with fish that can live through the winter.

He's already introduced local tadpoles to the pond in hopes of raising his own frogs. Dragonflies and birds have already discovered the water hole.

"This is not the most beautiful pond in the world, but it's achievable," he said. "We're not up against the wetlands, we're up against the alley."

To conserve: Water right, try something else besides lawn

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Looking for ways to cut your water usage -- and water bill -- while still keeping your yard and garden fresh this summer?

"There's a huge demand for water use in modern society, especially for landscaping," said horticulture educator Nancy Pollard of the University of Illinois-Extension. "There's a tremendous

Here are some ways to conserve water.

• Reconsider your lawn

Kentucky bluegrass is virtually impervious, meaning that it can soak up almost no water during a heavy rain. Instead, all of that water runs off into the sewers and waterways, carrying along whatever fertilizers, salt or other chemicals it picks up along the way. It also contributes to flooding of basements.

"One of the reasons we flood is because of the widespread use of turf," said landscape architect Camille Stauber of Sustainable Places. She and her architect husband Joel Stauber are building a model home at 9822 Kedvale Ave., in Skokie that will be landscaped entirely with low-maintenance, low-water ground covers.

Stauber welcomes visitors to the yard who want to see the great variety of available ground covers, including edible blueberries, that she's planting, though she cautions that the garden is under construction and just taking off now.

"Many are natives, though not all of them," said Stauber, who has spent 30 years pushing for alternative yards and is constantly surprising customers who are impressed by the beauty and functionality of ground cover plants instead of lawns.

"I've had clients whose basement window wells filled up like aquariums (in a storm)," Stauber said. "I've worked with them and now the windows are perfectly dry."

Even if you don't replace your lawn with ground cover, think about adding more vegetation. Any kind of shrubs and plants will pull in water far better than a traditional lawn, although plants native to northeastern Illinois have the deepest roots.

"Vegetation essentially acts like a sponge to hold water so it can percolate down into the ground," Pollard said.

• Practice smart watering

The best time to water is in the very early morning, just before the sun rises, said Stauber, since that way the water doesn't evaporate, nor does it sit on the plants for long and promote fungal growth, as does watering in the evening.

The worst time to water is in the middle of the day, since the warm sun will evaporate water before it can soak into the ground.

Spreading mulch around your trees and shrubs and on your beds will also help keep the ground moist. But don't pile the mulch up next to the trunk, because that causes rot.

"Eventually you'll have premature death of the tree," Pollard said.

Using a timer and watering deeply once a week is also a better strategy than watering lightly everyday, she said.

Every July when it starts to get hot, David Husemoller lets his Grayslake lawn go dormant. So while his many patches of prairie plants flourish in color, height and health, his Kentucky bluegrass turns brown. But he still waters it about one quarter inch every three weeks, just to keep it alive so it will be a verdant green the following spring and early summer.

If you choose to maintain your lawn throughout the hot weather, Pollard recommends watering once a week so that the water penetrates at least 6 inches. A new lawn or one that's continually fertilized must also be watered continually.

"The lawn needs water if the turf starts to turn off color and shows footprints," she said. Once you pick a watering pattern, however, stick with it. But know that if the area gets caught in another drought, there's a good chance local officials will severely limit watering, like in summer 2005.

"The people who did not water much to begin with were better off than the people who were watering and then had to stop," Pollard said.

--Stephanie Fosnight