

A few weeks ago, I had the unique opportunity of getting to help plant a rain garden here in Kearney. The project was part of the Greener Towns Plant Project and is planted on the west side of the overpass by Steinbrink Landscaping and Greenhouses. The Greener Towns Plant Project is a program that helps provide funding to create landscape projects that will improve the quality of life in Nebraska. It is a partnership between the Nebraska Forest Service, Nebraska Extension, and the Nebraska Environmental Trust. The rain garden here in Kearney was also a partnership with Steinbrink Landscaping and Greenhouses. Helping plant the garden really got me thinking about what a rain garden was, what they can be used for, and the benefits they provide to the community.

A rain garden is a depression in the ground that is planted with native plants and is used to slow down the flow of rain into and across the soil. They are not detention cells, because they should not hold water for more than 48 hours depending on the rate of rainfall. Native plants are used because they generally have root systems that are better adapted for the local soil and weather conditions. Because they have adapted to be successful in this climate, they will need less maintenance than plants that are not native to Nebraska. This being said, it may still need some maintenance until the garden is fully established. Until then, it may need watered until the plants are established in their locations, checked and weeded for invasive weeds until the plants that belong there are big enough and numerous enough to outcompete anything that does not belong in the rain garden. Another added benefit of using plants that are native to Nebraska in a rain garden is that they will attract wildlife such as birds and insects to an area that they may not have been before due to the lack of habitat available for them.

Rain gardens are needed because as rain water runs off the roof of the house, over sidewalks or roads, and through yards, it picks up all of the associated pollutants on those surfaces like pesticides, herbicides, bacteria, and even fertilizer. If the rainwater runs directly through a yard to a storm drain and goes into a body of water like a lake or river, it takes the pollutants with them, which could then have unintended consequences on the ecosystem of the lake. As the water slows down to filter through the plant roots and the soil in the rain garden, the soil and roots will filter the pollutants out of the water, preventing the pollution of bigger bodies of water. Because it has been slowed down and allowed to disperse through the soil instead of running off, it will also assist in refilling the underground aquifers that lay beneath most of Nebraska.

If you have an area of land that consistently has runoff from rain when pours, want to attract more native wildlife, and keep pollutants out of the delicate ecosystems that exist in the lakes and rivers around Nebraska, a rain garden might be a good option to consider. They won't be able to do much about excessive flooding, but for the normal Nebraska season they have the potential to help a considerable amount, as well as being attractive and adding interest in a landscape. For more information on rain gardens, contact Miranda Earnest at the Buffalo County Extension Office, 308-236-1235 or mearnest2@unl.edu.