

## Part 1: Turning Rain into a Resource – Why Your Yard Needs a Rain Garden (published 2026-05-09)

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Living in Northeast Tennessee means embracing the beauty of the ridges, but it also means managing the water that runs off them. Over the next three weeks, we'll be exploring a smarter way to handle our local weather with a rain garden. In this three-part series, we'll start with the "why" and "where" of stormwater, followed by how to build your own, and finally, which native plants turn a drainage problem into a backyard sanctuary.

A rain garden essentially mimics the way a natural ecosystem handles water. Often described as a puddle with plants, it is a shallow, man-made depression designed to hold water runoff temporarily while it works its magic. Rain gardens aren't just drainage tools. They are living ecosystems. By using native plants, you provide essential food and shelter for birds, butterflies, and the pollinators that keep our Tennessee gardens blooming.

Strategic placement is essential for a successful rain garden. To find the sweet spot, we have to follow a few non-negotiable technical rules:

- **The 10-Foot Rule:** Always place your garden at least 10 feet away from your home's foundation. We want to infiltrate water, but we don't want it seeping into your basement or compromising the structural integrity of your foundation.
- **Go with the Flow:** Your garden must be located down-slope from your house, never above it. We want to catch the water as it moves away from the structure.
- **Mind the Slope:** Ideally, look for a relatively flat area with a slope between 3% and 8%. If the ground is steeper than 10%, it will require significantly more digging and labor to keep the water from just overtopping the basin.

Before we finalize the location, we need to perform a simple percolation test. Think of the percolation test as a simple health check for your yard to see if the soil can absorb water.

- **Dig a Hole:** Dig a hole about 18 inches deep in your chosen spot.
- **The Pre-Soak:** Fill it with water and let it drain completely. This saturates the clay so we get a real-world reading.
- **The Test:** Refill the hole with about 12 inches of water.
- **Observe:** Time how long it takes to disappear. For a successful rain garden, it must drain within 72 hours.

If the water is gone in about 24 hours, you have "quick-draining" soil—that's great! We'll just need to choose plants that don't mind a little extra dry time. However, if the water never drains, don't lose heart just yet. In our heavy clay, it's easy to accidentally seal the sides of the hole with

your shovel while digging. Try making a second hole nearby before you give up on the site. A rain garden is NOT a water garden. It should dry out eventually.

Avoid these areas to keep your system safe.

- Septic fields and wellheads: Stay at least 25 feet away from septic tanks, drain fields, or wellheads to prevent any interference with your home's water and waste systems.
- Public right-of-ways: Avoid utility easements or public rights-of-way.
- Tree canopies: Placing a garden under a large tree can smother the tree's root system and the shade may prevent your rain garden plants from transpiring water effectively.
- Existing wet spots: If an area of your yard is always mushy or holds water year-round, your soil is already telling you it can't handle more infiltration. Putting a rain garden there defeats the purpose.
- High water table: The bottom of your garden should be at least 2 feet above the seasonal high-water table.

By taking the time to select and test your site properly, you are doing more than just starting a new flower bed. You are transforming your yard from a source of runoff into a community resource. You are ensuring that the rain falling on your roof today becomes the clean groundwater of tomorrow.

Next Week in Part 2: Preparing and Digging Your Rain Garden.

## Resources

“Stormwater Management for Homeowners Fact Sheet 5: Rain Gardens,”  
[https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/pubs\\_ext\\_vt\\_edu/en/SPES/SPES-13/SPES-13.html](https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/pubs_ext_vt_edu/en/SPES/SPES-13/SPES-13.html)

“Percolation Test Directions,”  
[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ogEF6CAgpYGvzTA3\\_Tp21V2dYJ\\_U6Xm7/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ogEF6CAgpYGvzTA3_Tp21V2dYJ_U6Xm7/view)

“Rain Gardens for Tennessee: A Homeowner's Guide,”  
<https://utia.tennessee.edu/publications/wp-content/uploads/sites/269/2023/10/W1137.pdf>

## How do I ask a question?

If you have questions for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at [www.netmga.net](http://www.netmga.net). Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.