

Part 3: The Greenery — Adding Life and Color to Your Rain Garden (published 2026-05-23)
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Now that the heavy lifting of digging and soil prep is behind you, it's time for the most rewarding phase - bringing your rain garden to life. In our corner of Northeast Tennessee, from the banks of the Holston to the Watauga watershed, a garden is more than just curb appeal - it's a working piece of the natural infrastructure.

By selecting hardy native plants, you transform a simple shallow depression into a high-performing landscape feature. Think of your rain garden as moisture management. Where you place each plant determines whether it thrives or drowns.

The Lower Zone: The Water Lovers

This is the center that lies lowest and stays wet the longest after a storm. These plants need to have damp feet and won't mind a temporary deep soak.

- **Blue Flag Iris (*Iris versicolor*):** This is a true rain garden classic. It grows between 1 to 3 feet tall and produces stunning blue flowers in the spring and naturalizes to form beautiful colonies.
- **Soft Rush (*Juncus effusus*):** If you want a plant that looks like a modern art piece, this is it. It is a clumping, grass-like plant that grows about 4 feet tall. It is an absolute champion of the lower elevation and provides fantastic texture to the rain garden.
- **White Turtlehead (*Chelone glabra*):** Named for its unique blossom shape, this 3-foot beauty blooms with white flowers from August to October. It loves the damp conditions of the lower and middle zones.

The Middle Zone: The Versatile Transformers

This is the sloped or transitional area of your garden. Plants here need to be flexible—happy to be damp one day and dry the next.

- **Blue Star (*Amsonia tabernaemontana*):** This is one of my personal favorites for middle to upper zones. It stands about 3 feet tall and offers sky-blue flowers in the spring, followed by gorgeous golden foliage in the fall.
- **Mistflower (*Conoclinium coelestinum*):** Looking for late-season color? This 2-foot plant produces fluffy lavender-blue blooms from August to September. It is incredibly versatile and can handle any zone from the wet bottom to the dry rim.
- **Spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*):** If you want a shrub for your middle zone, Spicebush is a winner. It can grow up to 12 feet tall and produces cheerful yellow flowers in early April. It's a fantastic host plant for butterflies!

The Upper Zone: The Drought-Tolerant Rim

The outside ring of your garden lies at the highest elevation and will stay the driest. These plants need to be tough enough to handle Tennessee's summer heat while still being okay with an occasional drink.

- **Purple Coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*):** A staple in any sunny garden, this plant is specifically recommended for the upper elevation rim. It grows 3 to 5 feet tall and is a magnet for pollinators like bees and butterflies.
- **Christmas Fern (*Polystichum acrostichoides*):** For those of you with a shadier rain garden, the Christmas fern is a must. It stays green year-round, grows up to 4 feet, and thrives in the well-drained soil of the middle to upper elevations.
- **Wild Geranium (*Geranium maculatum*):** This charming perennial grows 1 to 2 feet tall and produces pale pink to lilac blooms in the spring. It's a perfect fit for the transitional slopes and drier edges.

Plant Grouping: Avoid the polka-dot look of a single plant placed here and there. Group perennials and shrubs in clusters of 3 to 5. This mimics nature and creates a stronger visual impact.

Spacing for Canopy Closure: Space your plants so their mature canopies will touch. This creates a living mulch that shades out weeds and keeps the soil cool.

The Right Mulch: Use 2 to 3 inches of **shredded hardwood mulch**. Avoid light wood chips. A heavy rain will float the mulch right out of your basin, whereas shredded hardwood mulch knits together and stays put.

Maintaining the Rain Garden

For the first six months, your new plants need about **1 inch of water per week** if the clouds don't cooperate.

TIP: Unlike your other flower beds, **DO NOT mulch your rain garden every year**. Remember, this garden is a basin. Every inch of extra mulch you add is an inch of water-holding volume you lose. Over-mulching eventually turns your "sponge" back into a flat mound, ruining its ability to function as a rain garden.

Resources

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

“Stormwater Management for Homeowners Fact Sheet 5: Rain Gardens,”
https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/dam/pubs_ext_vt_edu/spes/spes-13/SPES-612.pdf

“Rain Garden Plants,”
https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/dam/pubs_ext_vt_edu/426/426-043/SPES-57.pdf

“Rain Garden Plants,”
<https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/426/426-043/426-043.html>

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. 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.