

# Raingarden Maintenance

So you have a raingarden. Congratulations! The hardest work is over, but it's still going to take some time and energy for your newest yard feature to stay beautiful and functional.



## Establishment

Newly planted raingardens require special care to ensure their success. Tiny plants are vulnerable to drying out, and all the overturned soil can expose weed seeds that had been laying dormant for years. Your planting plan can help you know which plants are what and where they belong; plants not on the plan are likely weeds.

**Weed**—Weed often and thoroughly. Many weeds thrive in recently disturbed environments—pulling small seedlings disturbs the soil as little as possible, and is easier on you as well. If you can keep weeds from establishing, in a couple years your native plants will grow large enough to help suppress them.

**Mulch**—Keeping 2 inches of double-shredded hardwood mulch is a good defense against weeds and drought. Topdress your mulch every spring before your plants get too big, for the first few years at least.



**Water**—In their first year, young plants need 1-2 inches of water per week. Place a gauge, can or jar in the garden and supplement rainfall as needed. Additional watering may be needed during dry, hot days. Keeping your garden watered until frost will give it the best chance to survive the winter and come back stronger in the spring.

## Pollinator-Friendly Practices

Raingardens use native plants to infiltrate stormwater and protect our local lakes and rivers. They can also support pollinators—many of which are struggling due to habitat loss and overuse of pesticides. Healthy plants provide high-quality nectar and pollen to hungry pollinators. Providing them with homes is easy too:

- Most native bees nest in the ground. They need bare, sandy soil. If you can provide it, leave a patch of ground mulch-free at the top of the south-facing edge of your raingarden (where a nest won't flood when the basin fills with runoff).
- Other native bees create nests in hollow plant stems. When you cut back dead plant material in the spring, leave 12-18 inches of stubble sticking out of the ground—and leave it there for at least another year! This stubble will quickly be hidden by new growth, and many bees use last year's stems to produce next year's generations.



- Pollinators need water too! If it hasn't rained in a little while, consider putting out a rock-filled water bowl.

## Ongoing Maintenance

**Weed**—Staying ahead of weeds is easiest. Spending an hour a month in your raingarden is a great way to control weed populations as well as enjoy the beautiful native plants and pollinators that come visit them. At the very least, weed three times a year—right around Memorial, Independence, and Labor Day. Be sure to pull all tree seedlings before they get too big.

No herbicides should be used or needed, as they fail to differentiate between a desirable plant and a weed. Sometimes it helps to look for the pattern of plants from your original raingarden plan to get a sense of what belongs where.

**Divide**—Your plants may outgrow their original planting spaces and need to be moved or divided. This is best done in the spring before new growth is 4 inches tall, or after they're done flowering. Dig up the whole plant and cut into sections so that each has roots attached. Replant, and/or share with friends.

**Replace**—To replace dead or dying plants, take note of their site conditions; are they in sun or shade, and at the top, edge, or bottom of the basin? You can find suitable replacement plants and nurseries to buy them at [bluethumb.org](http://bluethumb.org).

### Seasonal Notes

*Spring* is the best time to trim back plant material, re-mulch, move plants around, and get into the habit of weeding your garden.

*Summer* is full of wildlife visiting your garden; be sure to take some time to enjoy it! In lengthy droughts, your plants will appreciate a little water. Keep up the weeding!

*Fall* is a good time to inspect your raingarden and take note of any structural issues—erosion, proper drainage, etc. Fallen leaves make good mulch for the garden, and can protect plants from extreme cold in winters that lack snow cover. Shred them with a lawnmower first, to keep them from clinging too tightly together.

*Winter* brings time to come up with plans for next year. Try to keep from piling too much snow into your garden—especially if it contains de-icing salt, which accumulates in soil and is toxic to your plants.

### Weeds to Watch For

#### *Cool Season Weeds (Spring and Fall)*

- Dandelion
- Crab grass
- Sweet Clover
- Thistle
- Garlic Mustard
- Volunteer trees

#### *Warm Season Weeds (Summer)*

- Quackgrass
- Crab grass
- Barnyard grass
- Foxtail grass
- Reed Canary grass
- Ragweed
- Creeping Bellflower
- Spotted Knapweed
- Smartweed
- Stinging Nettle
- Volunteer trees

**Trim**—Remove diseased material as soon as possible, but leave all non-diseased plant material in the garden over the winter. Seedheads and stalks provide food and habitat for birds and small mammals, and create winter interest and scenic value. In the spring, trim dead stems to desired height (12-18" is recommended for pollinator habitat) and consider leaving the clippings.

Letting plants grow in their own litter more closely resembles the growing conditions of the natural environment, and adds free “mulch” to your garden. You can trim each plant into smaller pieces, starting from the top of the plant and working downwards, making cuts every 4-6 inches or so; just let the material fall into place.

Trimming your raingarden in the spring is a great way to keep it from looking messy, and providing an example of a beautiful raingarden to your friends and neighbors is a great way to encourage others to consider one too.

**Water**—After the first full year, your plants should have deep enough roots to supply their own water, though they will still benefit from supplemental watering during lengthy dry periods. Ensure they're watered into the fall so they stay healthy over the winter.