Old West Side Rain Gardens Germinate a Movement!

Many residents may recall that back in 2005 Old West Side residents were asked to volunteer their yards for a rain garden program. Harry Sheehan visited the OWS Garden Club and asked for a few homeowners to volunteer their yards for a custom rain garden design project. The effort was to improve Allen Creek, which flows through our neighborhood, albeit in an underground pipe.

Those first 20 rain gardens planted in 2006 were the seed of a program which now has grown to more than 170 rain gardens county-wide. All of these gardens were dug and planted by residents in their own yards, with native plants, cultivars and plants they received from a neighbor. Gardeners are nothing if not generous!

Coming full circle, residents might be wondering what good those first rain gardens did, and what is the effect on the creek?

Rain Gardens within the Allen Creek watershed have protected the creek from 650 thousand gallons a year of rainwater runoff – that is how much rain they capture. Not bad for a little landscaping.

Rainwater sounds clean, but once it runs over asphalt shingles, picks up oils and brake dust from the driveway, sediment from the gutter, and salt from the road, it is no longer so pristine. Fish can't live in such polluted waters, and the City of Ann Arbor gets 80% of its drinking water from the Huron River. So keeping creek water clean benefits everyone: Or at least everyone who drinks water.

So where does all that pollution go? The bacteria and organic material in the soil of a rain garden break down many petroleum-based pollutants. The heavy metals just stay in the gardens, but are less harmful when they are out of the water.

Master Rain Gardeners have been the biggest source of new rain gardens lately. There are 13 trained Master Rain Gardeners in the Allen Creek watershed now. Master Rain Gardeners are community volunteers who are ready to share their expertise with their neighbors.

After being trained by Washtenaw County Water Resources, Master Rain Gardeners are always thinking up new rain garden projects. Master Rain Gardener Stefan Szumko led students and parents to plant a new rain garden at Eberwhite Elementary at last year's ice cream social. The new rain garden takes runoff from the Basketball Court.

Eberwhite Elementary during ice cream social in 2013. Photo of Stefan Szumko.

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Aaron Hammer has a dream of seeing beautiful rain gardens all along Madison from First to Sixth Streets. Aaron, who is a landscape architect, was disappointed when the rain gardens originally planned as part of the Madison Street reaping project were replaced with an underground detention system. Aaron says while this works to divert rainwater from the storm sewer, it ignores the aesthetics. Instead of complaining, Aaron decided he would do what he could to make the rain gardens happen anyway. The ones that he envisions at each southwest corner, would “look aesthetically nice, be ecologically sustainable, and add biological diversity.”

Aaron plans to show people the kind of garden he has in mind on the Madison sidewalk strip in front of Wustner Park. The city has a program called “adopt a median,” similar to “adopt a park” so he can get permission by filling out a form. “It would give more knowledge of rain gardens and instill inspiration and energy in the community,” he explains. He would include plants that attract butterflies and bees and ones that would add texture and color to the gardens as well as further assisting in drainage.

The project would cost about $2,500 if hired out, but if people volunteer to help with the installation and donations, the cost could be much less. With enough volunteers Aaron says it could be done in a weekend or maybe even an afternoon. He is hoping that the resulting garden would be so beautiful that “drivers would slow down because they are looking at it and walkers would pause and reflect.” After the first garden is in, his next step would be to talk to the neighbors who live near each of the southwest corners to see if they’d like to pool their resources to create more gardens.

Aaron graduated from MSU with a degree in landscape architecture in 2008. His family lives in Manchester, but he thought he needed a bigger customer base for a successful business, so looked to Ann Arbor as the nearest ‘big city’. He was familiar with the Old West Side from going on Home Tours so decided to start here. “It has the charm and feel of a small town, it made the transition comfortable,” he explains, adding, “I liked the architecture of the old German homes and the quietness of the streets, although close to downtown.”

Aaron pays his bills in the winter by shoveling snow, a side business that evolved from his customers asking him if he would do this. In between snow storms he tries to get some design work done so that it doesn’t take time away from his outside work in the summer. This winter he’s also doing a wall and ceiling painting at a Victorian house in Manchester. In his free time, he enjoys painting pictures, especially landscapes.

To make a donation or to volunteer to help with the installation of the rain garden, call Aaron at 678-7813 or e-mail him at hammer.aaron@gmail.com — Grace Shackman

Visualize Rain gardens on Madison Street

Aaron's decision to begin in the Old West Side was vindicated when his early customers quickly tied him into a larger network. He got his first jobs, to design a landscape for Kathy Clark and Mike Anglin at their Garden Inn Bed and Breakfast, because a friend of his mother's was a friend of Kathy’s. Aaron likes the idea of sharing plants, so when he needed ferns, Kathy sent him over to Barbara Murphy, whose yard was filled with them. Not only did he get plant material, but soon Barbara and her husband Gavin Earle hired him to landscape their yard. Barbara was so happy with the result that she wrote an article about him in the Old West Side News. His third customer, Maryll Zimmerman, an OWS board member who has since moved to Chicago, told him about a duplex near her that was for rent. Before this he had been commuting from Manchester, while he waited to find a place in the OWS. Every year Gavin and Barbara host a backyard party. When the guests saw Aaron's handiwork at the 2011 gathering, he got more commissions. He learned about the Old West Side Garden Club at the same time, and he joined and made further connections. So his work load began to explode. The next year he had so many jobs that he had to hire a helper. Last year he had four part-time assistants. Although his base is still the OWS, he now has customers all over town. What people really like is the way he is sensitive to each project. He can restore a garden to how it used to be or what the customer was trying to do, or he can do a garden from scratch. Either way each garden is personal to the homeowner.

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