

"Federation Corner" column
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Civic Federation hosted program on rainscapes

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The first hour or so of each monthly meeting of the Montgomery County Civic Federation usually consists of an informational program either on a timely issue in which the MCCF is involved or on a topic of general countywide importance to our delegates.

The topic of the program for the December 3 Civic Federation meeting was the county's Rainscapes program, an initiative of the Department of Environment Protection (DEP). Our speaker was Ann English, a landscape architect who is the Rainscapes Program Coordinator with the DEP. Ann began her presentation with an overview of the condition of the county's watersheds and streams, which are endangered by storm water runoff.

Ann explained that initially the county was largely forested, and the soil absorbed rainfall. Now that the land is primarily urban or suburban in nature, rainwater flows across paved surfaces, picking up pollutants and depositing them in the streams that make up the county's watersheds, and eventually impacting the Chesapeake Bay.

The Rainscapes program provides both technical assistance and rebates to help County residents slow the flow of stormwater, spread it out, and let it soak into the ground. This is important because stormwater damages aquatic life by carrying pollutants into our waterways, scouring out streams, and raising water temperatures. Encouraging stormwater to soak into the ground also helps recharge the shallow groundwater flow to our local streams, thus allowing them to continue to flow during the dry summer months.

This DEP program encourages citizens, institutions, and businesses to install conservation landscaping, rain gardens, rain barrels and other techniques designed to help capture, infiltrate and cleanse stormwater. In a nutshell, Rainscapes Rewards let you "get green for being green." However, to be eligible, residents must be outside the municipal limits of Rockville, Takoma Park, and Gaithersburg. (Rockville and Gaithersburg have their own city-sponsored programs.)

Since 70% of the County's impervious surfaces are located on private property, it's vitally important that citizens and neighborhoods become involved in addressing this environmental issue. If your civic association, garden club, scout troop, or other organization would like to become involved with rainscapes, contact the program at 240-777-7702 or askdep@montgomerycountymd.gov. Rainscapes can provide door hangers and other promotional materials to help you inform your group or community about the program. Institutions are also eligible, so if you are unable to create a rainscapes at home, consider a project at your place of worship, community pool, or your children's school.

Rainscapes rebates are available for installing the following practices:

- Conservation Landscaping (native plant landscapes)
- Permeable Pavers (un-grouted pavers that allow infiltration)
- Rain Gardens (slightly concave gardens that hold rainwater for a few hours)
- Pavement Removal (converting impervious surfaces to planted areas)
- Green Roofs (a few inches of light soil supports small drought-resistant plants)
- Planting Trees (trees must shade or cover an impervious area)
- Cisterns (large containers for capturing rain water)

- Dry Wells (stone-filled pits or trenches for infiltration)
- Rain Barrels (for collecting and storing roof runoff)

It may not seem like these techniques will make much of a difference, but they truly can. For example, the Maryland Department of the Environment notes that trees, shrubs, and groundcovers can absorb up to fourteen times more rainwater than a grass lawn (From *Facts about Stormwater Conservation in Your Backyard*, accessed online 12/11/12). Native plants can be particularly helpful in this regard. Common turf grass roots extend only 3-6 inches into the soil. In contrast, a number of native grasses and perennials have roots which can extend several feet into the soil, and some native grasses have roots as deep as ten-twelve feet.

In addition to reducing water pollution, Ann noted that practices which utilize native plants provide a wealth of environmental benefits, such as supporting birds and butterflies, pollinators, and beneficial insects. Trees also mitigate air pollution, increase property value up to 20%, and if properly sited can reduce home energy bills. Green roofs also reduce energy consumption, plus they can last twice as long as a conventional roof. Rainscapes practices can also help reduce drainage problems in your yard.

Ann also told us that the program's rebate amounts have been increased, and that our Civic Federation meeting was the first public announcement of the new amounts. The maximum residential (single family) rebate has more than doubled from \$1,200 to \$2,500 per parcel. The maximum available for multi-family, commercial, institutional, and HOA common land has doubled from \$5,000 per parcel to \$10,000.

For more information on the Rainscapes Program, check out their website on the internet at www.rainscapes.org. The site contains lots of information such as how to select which practice will work best in your yard; where you can go to see some installed practices; and design / installation manuals for each of the practices. You can even apply for a rebate online. (Remember, however, your application must be approved before you install the practice.)

So next time it rains, take a walk around your property. Where does the rain from your gutters go? Does your down spout send the water straight down your driveway to the street, or is the water delivered to your lawn or garden? Is there active erosion occurring anywhere in your yard? Do you have a wet spot that holds water long after it rains? Have you lost trees? Do you have plants in your garden that need a lot of water in the summertime? If so, rainscapes may be for you.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to theelms518@earthlink.net