

Wilcox Park Rain Garden

The north side of Wilcox Park, from the top of the hill by the YMCA to the Grove Street entrance, has historically been an undeveloped area. At the lowest part, the area for decades had been a dumping ground for leaves. As a result, the leaf mold compost that was generated piled up so high that several mature trees had their trunks buried, which consequently caused rot that warranted removal.

To address this issue, which was unsightly and not beneficial to the area, the Rain Garden was built in 2010, in a collaborative effort with Save the Bay and Wilcox Park, with assistance from Chariho High School students. The Rain Garden demonstrates sustainable landscaping and stormwater management, given that the Park is completely surrounded by impervious surfaces. The 1,000 square-foot garden redirected and filtered runoff from a paved parking lot adjacent to the park land that enters the park through a hole in the wall. The Rain Garden was designed to capture the first inch of rain, the most polluted, and filter it prior to going into the storm drains or the aquifer that goes directly into the Pawcatuck River.

The Rain Garden was planted with native plants, which are generally more resistant to diseases and pests and have stronger root systems. But over time the large, aggressive perennials like false sunflower (*Heliopsis helianthoides*) and cup plant (*Silphium perfoliatum*) outgrew the original garden and moved through the surrounding area unchecked. Invasive plants like tree of heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*) and mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*) also moved in. The area became fondly known as the “Rain Forest.”

Key features of any rain garden can still be seen:

- A basin and dry riverbed lined with stones. The garden base is perpendicular to the slope, and this garden includes a basin due to the magnitude of the stormwater issue. A bald cypress (*Taxodium distichum*), a deciduous conifer, serves as the garden’s centerpiece. The bottom of the rain garden is level and required substantial digging on the high side.
- A berm to detain runoff. Berms may be mulched or planted with grass or rain garden plants.
- Mulch. This keeps the weeds down, improves the look of the garden, and reduces runoff. This garden used wood chips and mulch.



On the hillside, along the walk, Master Gardener and community volunteers have removed invasives and planted shade tolerant perennials, mostly native plants. Earlier this year, a landscape designer specializing in habitat and ecological landscape restoration was asked to help develop a plan to remove the invasive and overly aggressive plants and determine an approach to fill the entire area with native shrubs, surrounding what will be the revamped Rain Garden.

To date, the park staff have been killing and cutting down the plants, from the Learning Garden at the top of the hill all the way to the Grove Street entrance. Next, the dry river bed will be rebuilt with stone and extended around the bald cypress. Over the winter, a rough design will be completed and native shrubs identified for future plantings. Given the size of the area, the speed of progress on the new plantings will be dependent on grants and donations.

As work on this area continues, we will provide updates and photos of the progress.

By Sandi Carmichael, Park Committee member and Master Gardener

