The Central Ohio Rain Garden Initiative (CORGI) was pleased to be a part of the annual Central Environmental Nursery Trade Show (CENTS) this past month. The idea was to be able to reach out to our landscaper and garden center cohorts in conservation. A display was created to entice visitors to discuss how CORGI can play a role in helping to educate their customers on the importance of incorporating storm water infiltration as a consideration on their properties. Outreach to the landscapers and garden centers at this event is the first step in this process.

The display featured a house drawn on a backdrop with downspouts that lead to a display rain garden and rain barrel. The display was created by Jancy McClellan-Ryan, a local textile artist, who offered part of the costs of the project as a voluntary contribution. The Scott’s Miracle-Gro Company, Tetra Tech, Franklin Soil and Water, Brown and Caldwell, Friends of the Lower Olentangy Watershed, the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission, and the City of Columbus were among the generous sponsors of the display booth.

Nineteen CORGI members volunteered to staff the display booth. Great questions, feedback, and lots of fun were had at our booth situated in a prominent location.

CORGI plans to outreach further with landscapers, nurseries, and garden centers to provide display materials, plant tags that identify rain garden plants, trainings for garden center staff, and more. A CORGI display booth is planned again for 2013 and 2014. Thanks to everyone who helped make this event and our display a success!

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If you have a rain garden project you would like to share in our newsletter, please contact us through the Contact Us button on our website: www.centralohioraingardens.org.

1st Quarter Calendar of Events
February and March
February - March 30th: Franklin Soil and Water Annual Spring Sale
Order your native trees, shrubs, and perennials through this annual sale that funds conservation projects in Franklin County. Fish, fruit trees, water conservation tools, rain garden kits, mushroom kits, and more are also available. Order online at www.franklinswcd.org. Last day to order fish is 3/23 (pick up on 3/29); last day to order plants and other supplies is 3/30 (pick up on 4/20 and 4/21).

February 25th-March 4th: Central Ohio Home and Garden Show
A rain garden presentation will be featured at 2pm on March 1st at this year’s Central Ohio Home and Garden Show at the Ohio Expo Center.

March 15th: Rain Garden Workshop
Attend this rain garden workshop at 6:30pm at the Grange Insurance Audubon Center to learn about what rain gardens are, their benefits, and how to install them. Partnership workshop between the Grange Insurance Audubon Center and Franklin Soil and Water. Registration is $10 and can be done at www.grangeinsuranceauduboncenter.org.

March 18th: Rain Garden Presentation
Oakland Nursery’s annual Spring Fling in Delaware will feature a rain garden presentation at 1pm by CORGI member Amy Dutt from Urban Wild. Join her to learn what rain gardens are and how to install one. Registration is free, but space is limited so reserve your seat today at: 740-548-6633.
Spotlight on Resources: The Blue Thumb Program

Franklin Soil and Water Conservation District is now a partner of the Blue Thumb program. The Blue Thumb program has an emphasis on Planting for Clean Water™ with native plants through three practices: native gardens, rain gardens, and shoreline stabilization.

The Blue Thumb program is an award-winning collaborative program originally developed by Rice Creek Watershed District in Minnesota. Blue Thumb partners are a group of professionals from local governmental units (watershed and conservation districts, cities, counties); non-profit and community organizations; and nursery and landscape professionals. The Blue Thumb program was featured as the first stop on the “Blue Legacy Tour” co-sponsored by National Geographic.

A partnership in Blue Thumb means sharing a unified message as well as resources among other professionals, organizations, and educators who care about water quality, and being able to provide resources for anyone planning to engage in storm water protection practices, residents and professionals alike. The Blue Thumb website is a great resource for finding plant information through the Plant Selector section. Search for plants based on the conditions of the site, bloom time, bloom color, practice to be planted in, and more. Visitors to the website can also find local resources (still updating our local information on this part) including grant opportunities and events. Check out www.bluethumb.org today!

Sister Initiatives

The Central Ohio Rain Garden Initiative gets many calls each week from people in central Ohio, across the state, and from other states across the country. Several Ohio locations have started up rain garden initiatives of their own, reaching all four corners of the Buckeye State and areas in between. Below is a list of our sister initiatives - some founded before us, some founded after, and some getting started now. We all try to stay in touch and swap project information as new items of interest come up. If you live in or close to one of these areas, contact them to see what up-to-date rain garden information they have and public rain gardens to visit. There are also many organizations in Ohio working on installing rain gardens and educating the local public about their benefits and functions. (That list would be too long to print here...)

Many Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD) in Ohio promote rain gardens. Contacting your county’s SWCD is a good starting point for local information on soils and potential rain garden locations that can benefit the local streams. Hamilton and Geauga SWCDs assisted in the writing of rain garden manuals, and many SWCDs have rain garden information on their websites and in their offices.

Sister Initiatives:
Greater Cincinnati Rain Garden Alliance (Mill Creek Watershed Council of Communities)
http://millcreekwatershed.org/rain-gardens.html
Marietta Region Rain Garden Initiative (Friends of Lower Muskingum River)
http://www.muskingumriver.org/rgcleanriver.html
Toledo-Lucas County Rain Garden Initiative (Lucas Soil and Water Conservation District and American Rivers)
http://www.raingardeninitiative.org/
Chagrin River Watershed Partners
http://www.crwp.org/LID/rain_gardens.htm
Athens, OH (Athens Soil and Water Conservation District)
http://www.projectplant.org/raingardens.html

(Contact us if you have an initiative started and it's not listed here: Stephanie Suter at ssuter@franklinswcd.org)
Rain Garden Planning: Winter Interest

When planning rain gardens, we always think of the abundance of color that will overtake the garden in the summer with spectacular blooms. What we usually don't plan for is the seasons when the rain garden is mostly dormant and the plants have faded back. This is about half the year, so planning our rain gardens for fall and winter is important aesthetically as well as important for any wildlife potentially using the garden for cover or food.

You don't have to be a professional to incorporate a few simple landscape design ideas into your rain garden plan. Think about the structure of your rain garden and how you'd like it to look - will it be cut all the way back by winter or will there be some plants still standing providing color, texture, or seeds and hiding places for wildlife. Try to think of what it will look like when the plants are mostly brown and gray during the dormant season. Go outside and take a look in your own yard or neighborhood for what types of plants look the best during this time. Grasses, shrubs, and some perennials can still be attractive and functional through winter.

Some foliage of grasses take on a yellowish appearance while dormant. Others may have a reddish/bluish tint, like little bluestem. The bark of some shrubs and trees is so unique that many plant them just for that characteristic - the papery, peeling bark of river birch, or the red branches of red twig dogwood. Evergreens are nice to see in the dark winter months and provide great cover for birds, but be careful not to plant these in a rain garden too close to areas that get salty runoff or salt spray in the winter, like a roadway, driveway, or walkway. The seed heads left up on purple coneflower, blazingstar, and black-eyed Susan can be magnets for songbirds (especially finches).

There will be some plants that really just don't look that great (like blue false indigo which turns black and crumply) or die all the way back (like many early spring blooming plants), so think of maybe a stone that matches your surrounding landscaping, a small bird bath, or an art structure to place in the garden to give your rain garden an added touch of fullness. Incorporating year-round interest to your rain garden and watching it change from season to season can be fun for you, the wildlife, and your neighbors!
The Rain Gardener

Featured Plant: Blue flag iris

Blue flag iris is a great rain garden plant to be located within the garden where it will have the most potential for receiving water. The white and yellow centers lead out to a dark bluish purple flower, blooming in May and June. Although blue flag iris is a spring bloomer, it does manage to have its grass-like foliage stay green and lush throughout the growing season. The flowers are smaller (2-3” wide) than irises that most of us plant in our garden beds. Hummingbirds and butterflies are attracted to this beautiful, versatile plant’s flowers.

Blue flag iris is 1-2 feet tall, and the flowers can be cut and used in arrangements. Southern blue flag iris (Iris virginica) is native to Ohio, and its cousin northern blue flag iris (Iris versicolor) is native to the northern Midwest (Minnesota, Michigan, Wisconsin, and the northern parts of Iowa and Illinois).

Blue flag iris can tolerate up to 12” of inundation of water, so planting it in the rain garden closest to the main source of water will ensure that it gets extra water even during the smallest rain events. Fortunately, it can also handle dry times very well.

Resources for the Homeowner

Winter is a great time to start planning for a rain garden. The Central Ohio Rain Garden Initiative has many resources to help in the planning process. The main resource is our website: www.centralohioraingardens.org. This is a “one-stop-shop” for all things rain garden related, and it includes: sizing information, steps to building a rain garden, considerations, planting lists, case studies, pictures of rain gardens across central Ohio, and an area to submit your rain garden to our tracking system once it’s completed. Other educational and technical resources available include:

- Quick Guide to Planning and Installing Rain Gardens
- Brochures
- Rain Garden yard signs (sold for $15 each)
- Planting lists
- The Blue Thumb Guide to Raingardens (sold for $18 through Franklin Soil and Water)
- Electronic versions of other rain garden manuals
- Requests for workshops

Cost-share grants available

There are several cost-share grants available to residents from partnerships that Franklin Soil and Water Conservation District has with municipalities and Franklin County. Applicants must be residents within one of the municipalities listed below. Franklin County residents with low-to-moderate income may also qualify for a cost-share grant through June 30th. The cost-share program exists as an incentive for installing a rain garden on residential properties. The grants allow residents to turn in their receipts for plants, compost, and mulch. Amounts to be reimbursed vary from location to location. Contact Stephanie at (614)486-9613 x125 if you would like more information and are a resident of the following locations: Franklin County Townships (low-to-moderate income bracket), Westerville, Gahanna, and Canal Winchester.