



A rain garden is more than a pretty flower bed. It is a shallow planted depression designed to temporarily capture rainwater and runoff from roofs, driveways, patios, and other hard surfaces.

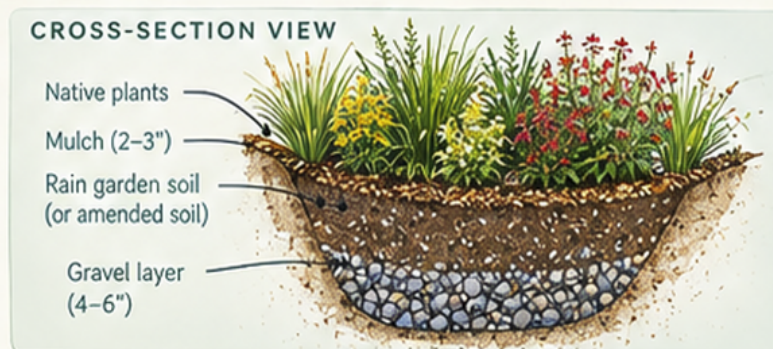
This design layers native plants to provide a place for rainwater to collect and drain naturally into the yard. It layers plants into the wettest and driest areas of your garden.

The plants, roots, soil, and microorganisms work together to slow runoff, filter pollutants, and help water soak into the ground. A properly designed rain garden should drain within about four days rather than remain permanently wet.

For Hampton Roads, choose plants that can handle our combination of heavy rain, clay soil, heat, humidity, and periods of drought.

Native plants help slow, absorb, and filter that water while providing food and habitat for pollinators and other wildlife.

Please refer to Rain Gardens: A Technical Guide by the Virginia Department of Forestry to determine the best location and other tips for creating your rain garden.



Think in Three Planting Zones

LOW ZONE — Wettest. The bottom of the garden receives water for the longest period.

Best choices:

- Swamp Rose Mallow
- Cardinal Flower
- Blue Mistflower
- Joe-Pye Weed

MIDDLE ZONE — Occasionally Wet. This area receives runoff but dries between rain events.

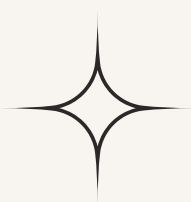
Best choices:

- Switchgrass
- Black-Eyed Susan
- Joe-Pye Weed
- Blue Mistflower

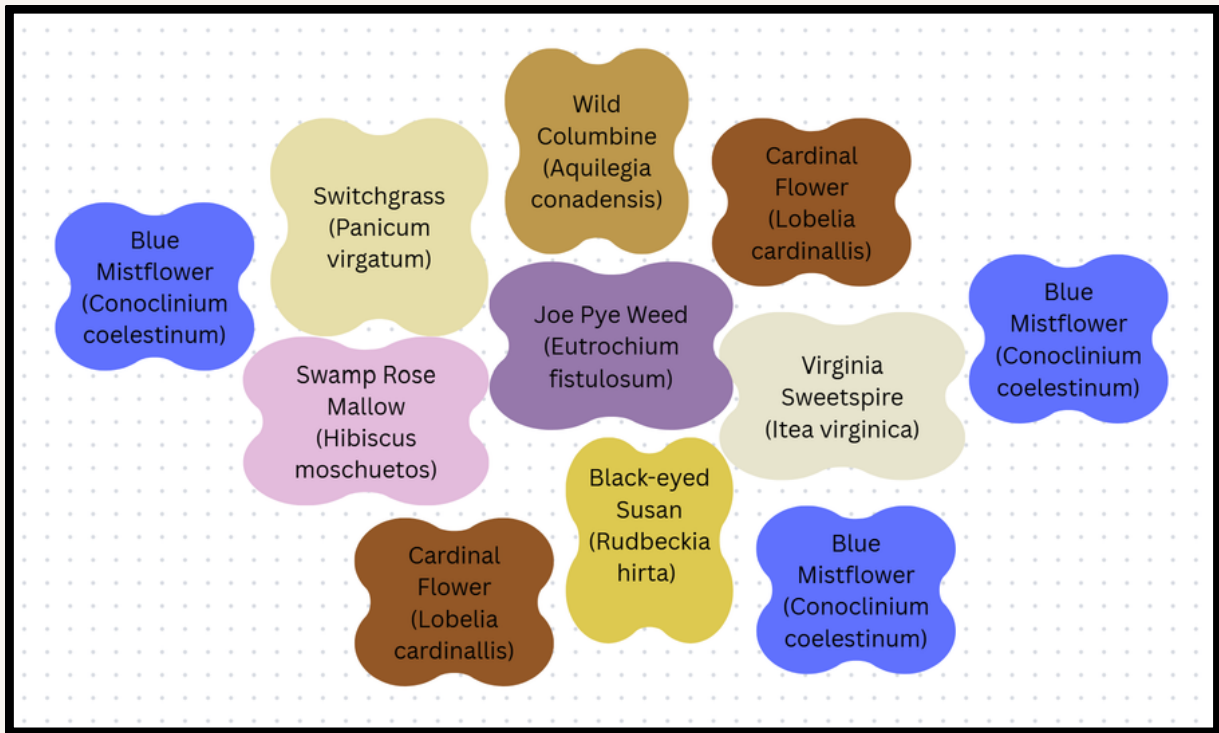
UPPER EDGE — Driest. The upper edge drains faster and may behave more like a regular garden.

Best choices:

- Wild Columbine
- Black-Eyed Susan
- Virginia Sweetspire
- Switchgrass

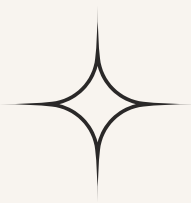


Garden Layout:



Plant List:

- Joe Pye Weed (Eutrochium fistulosum)
- Swamp Rose Mallow (Hibiscus moscheutos)
- Black-Eyed Susan (Rudbeckia hirta)
- Blue Mistflower (Conoclinium coelestinum)
- Virginia Sweetspire (Itea virginica)
- Wild Columbine (Aquilegia canadensis)
- Cardinal Flower (Lobelia cardinalis)



Native Plant Care & Information Guide

1. Switchgrass *Panicum virgatum*

Best location: Middle to upper zone

Light: Full sun to part shade

Height: Approximately 3–6 feet, depending on variety

Moisture: Adaptable; tolerates both wet periods and dry conditions once established

Switchgrass is one of the best structural plants for a rain garden. Its upright form adds height and movement while its extensive root system helps stabilize soil and manage runoff.

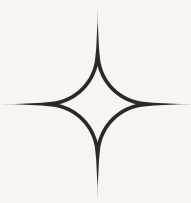
Planting Tips

- Give it plenty of room to reach its mature size.
- Use it toward the back or sides of the garden.
- Plant in groups for a stronger visual effect.
- Avoid planting it where its mature size will block smaller flowers.

Care

Switchgrass is generally low maintenance once established. It can be cut back in late winter or very early spring before new growth begins.

Root & Bloom Tip: Leave the dried seed heads standing through winter. They provide texture and can offer food and cover for wildlife.



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2. Black-Eyed Susan *Rudbeckia* spp.



Best location: Middle to upper zone

Light: Full sun

Height: Approximately 2–4 feet

Moisture: Average to moderately moist soil; tolerates some drought once established

Black-Eyed Susan brings bright yellow flowers to the rain garden and is an excellent choice for pollinator-friendly landscapes.

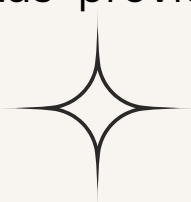
Planting Tips

- Place it where it receives plenty of sunlight.
- Avoid keeping it in constantly saturated soil.
- Plant several together for a natural drift of color.
- Allow some flowers to remain after blooming for seed heads.

Care

Water regularly while plants are establishing. Once established, Black-Eyed Susan generally needs less supplemental water.

Deadheading can encourage additional blooms, but leaving some seed heads provides winter interest and wildlife value.



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3. Swamp Rose Mallow

Hibiscus moscheutos

Best location: Low to middle zone

Light: Full sun

Height: Approximately 4–7 feet

Moisture: Moist to wet soil



Swamp Rose Mallow is a showstopper. Its large summer flowers bring a tropical-looking presence to the rain garden while being completely at home in wet conditions.

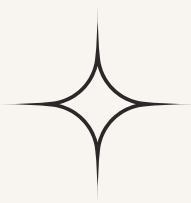
Planting Tips

- Give this plant room to grow.
- Place it toward the back or center of the rain garden.
- It is especially useful in areas that remain moist after rainfall.
- Avoid crowding it with smaller plants.

Care

Keep the soil consistently moist while the plant is becoming established.

The plant typically dies back to the ground in winter. Leave the stems standing through winter and cut them back in late winter or early spring before new growth appears.



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4. Cardinal Flower

Lobelia cardinalis

Best location: Low zone

Light: Part shade to full sun with adequate moisture

Height: Approximately 2–4 feet

Moisture: Moist to wet soil

Cardinal Flower produces intense red flowers that are especially attractive to hummingbirds.

Planting Tips

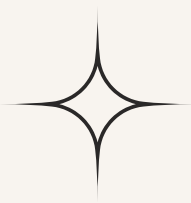
- Put it in the wetter portion of the garden.
- Protect it from becoming too dry.
- Part afternoon shade can be helpful in hot locations.
- Plant several together for a stronger visual impact.

Care

Cardinal Flower appreciates consistent moisture, particularly during hot, dry weather.

Allow some seed heads to mature rather than removing every spent flower.

Root & Bloom Tip: If your rain garden has a naturally moist corner that receives some shade, Cardinal Flower is a beautiful choice.



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5. Virginia Sweetspire

Itea virginica

Best location: Middle to upper zone

Light: Full sun to part shade

Height: Approximately 3–6 feet

Moisture: Moist to average soil; adaptable once established

Virginia Sweetspire is a great choice when you want a rain garden to have structure beyond the flowering season. It produces fragrant white flower spikes in early summer and can develop attractive fall color.



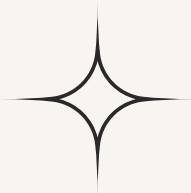
Planting Tips

- Give it room to spread.
- Use it along the upper or middle portions of the garden.
- It works particularly well as a transition between the rain garden and the rest of the landscape.
- Avoid placing it in the lowest area if that area stays saturated for long periods.

Care

Water during establishment and extended dry periods.

Prune after flowering if necessary to maintain its size and shape.



Native Plant Care & Information Guide

6. Blue Mistflower

Conoclinium coelestinum

Best location: Low to middle zone

Light: Full sun to part shade

Height: Approximately 2–4 feet

Moisture: Moist soil; tolerates periodically wet conditions

Blue Mistflower provides clouds of blue-purple flowers later in the growing season, making it particularly valuable when many spring flowers have finished.



Planting Tips

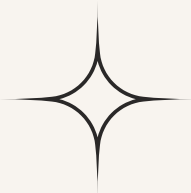
- Give it room to spread.
- Use it in groups rather than as a single specimen.
- Place it toward the middle or wetter portions of the garden.
- Combine it with yellow or white flowers for contrast.

Care

Water during extended dry periods, particularly while establishing.

It can spread and may need occasional thinning to keep it from crowding neighboring plants.

Root & Bloom Tip: Blue Mistflower is a wonderful late-season bridge between summer and fall color.



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7. Joe-Pye Weed

Eutrochium spp.

Best location: Low to middle zone

Light: Full sun to part shade

Height: Approximately 4–7+ feet depending on species



Joe-Pye Weed is one of the plants that gives a rain garden serious vertical presence. Its clusters of dusty pink to mauve flowers appear later in summer and attract butterflies and other pollinators.

Planting Tips

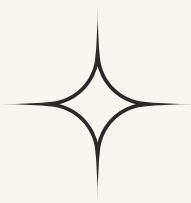
- Give it plenty of vertical and horizontal space.
- Put it toward the back of the garden.
- Use it as a tall background plant behind shorter flowers.
- Choose a species or cultivar appropriate for the size of your garden.

Care

Water regularly during establishment.

If plants become too tall or floppy, they can sometimes be cut back by about one-third in early summer to encourage a shorter, sturdier form.

Leave the dried flower heads standing into winter for additional texture and wildlife value.



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8. Wild Columbine

Aquilegia canadensis

Best location: Upper edge/drier portion



Light: Part shade to shade; can tolerate sun with adequate moisture

Height: Approximately 1–3 feet

Moisture: Average to moderately moist, well-drained soil
Wild Columbine is the plant on this list that should be treated differently from the wet-loving species. It is better suited to the upper edge of a rain garden, where water drains more quickly.

Its delicate red-and-yellow flowers arrive in spring and provide an early-season nectar source.

Planting Tips

- Do not plant it in the lowest, wettest part of the rain garden.
- Use it along the upper edge or beneath nearby trees.
- Give it well-drained soil.
- Allow it to self-seed naturally if you like a more informal garden.

Care

Wild Columbine is relatively easy once established.

Remove damaged or unattractive foliage as needed, but avoid excessive maintenance.