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Save the environment, build rain gardens, experts say

William J. Sciarappa wants to see 1,000 [rain gardens](#) built in Monmouth County by 2015.

Rain gardens — hollows in the soil with plants and trees — are meant to trap stormwater, allowing it to seep into the ground instead of running off the land and polluting waterways.

But will they make a difference in coping with the enormous flood of stormwater that gushes into waterways when it rains?

“We’re always going to have a large runoff,” said Sciarappa, county agricultural agent with [Rutgers Cooperative Extension of Monmouth County](#).

But a 5 percent reduction in runoff would be “a great goal and that’s a lot of water,” he said. “That’s millions and millions of gallons.”

Sciarappa and other clean water advocates are pushing for rain gardens, [rain barrels](#) and other “[green infrastructure](#)” to try to limit the amount of polluted [stormwater](#) runoff that reaches streams, rivers, lakes, bays and the ocean.

Wolfgang Skacel, assistant commissioner for compliance and enforcement in the state [Department of Environmental Protection](#), said “I think you would see a dramatic improvement in water quality” if people handled all of the stormwater that falls on their property and picked up after their pets.

Sciarappa’s team has installed more than 40 public demonstration rain gardens in Monmouth County.

“We’re trying to imitate Mother Nature’s fields and forests by planting a diversity of good-looking trees, shrubs, ornamentals that look like a garden but also function environmentally quite well,” he said.

“We can put a dent in the stormwater quantity and runoff if individual homeowners take responsibility by building small rain gardens,” Sciarappa said.

With a DEP grant, his team has built seven rain gardens on [Brookdale Community](#)

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College's campus in Middletown and plans to build maybe four or five more, he said.

Christopher C. Obropta, a water expert and associate professor at Rutgers University, said green infrastructure, such as rain gardens, [green roofs](#) and [porous pavement](#), is much less expensive than treatment plants. It also creates jobs, he said.

His program is going from town to town in New Jersey, promoting the use of rain barrels and rain gardens, which are extremely inexpensive. If enough people use them, they will have an impact, he said.

One residential rain garden can handle the runoff from 1,000 square feet of pavement and treat 25,000 gallons of stormwater a year, Obropta said. The plants for a garden cost about \$200, he said.

His group has built 125 demonstration rain gardens in the state over the past three or four years.

Eileen Althouse, a surfer, engineer and board member of the [Jersey Shore Chapter of the Surfrider Foundation](#), an environmental group, said she's developing a check list on ways to be an "ocean-friendly neighbor."

"We're just trying to improve the quality of our recreational waterways," said Althouse, who chairs the chapter's Ocean Friendly Gardens Program.

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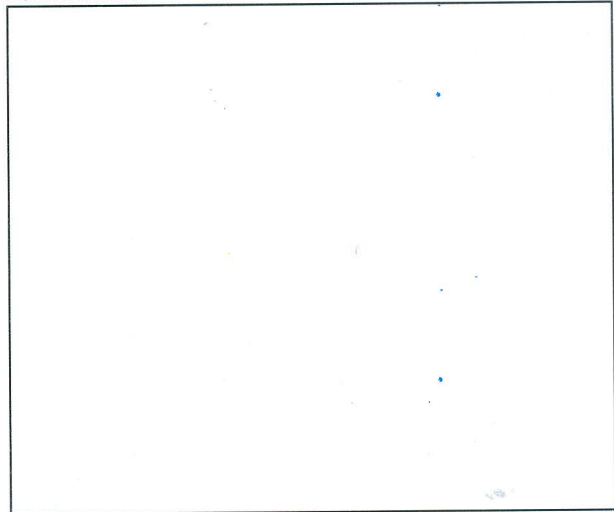
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