

Eatonville Strives to Be WA's "Rain Garden Capital"

Local News

Posted by: David Haviland

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Eatonville, WA - Spring is coming, and in one western Washington town, that means revving up the backhoes to dig in the dirt with the neighbors.

Residents of Eatonville already have installed dozens of rain gardens, as part of the town's goal to stop all polluted runoff from reaching their waterways. The two local rivers are prime salmon habitat, and the Nisqually Tribe and city leaders have led this effort to improve water quality. Concave patches of earth are dug and filled with plants to naturally absorb rainwater.

Nisqually River Education Project program director Sheila Wilson, with the Nisqually River Council, said it's also been good for community spirit.

"That is really our hope, that we can keep building on this successful beginning and help Eatonville cultivate that sense of pride in being stewards of the watershed," she said.

A recent grant from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) will be used to fund rain garden installations by high school students as a senior project, Wilson explained. The town wants to be known, eventually, for having more rain gardens per capita than any other in the state, she said.

At stake are the health of Ohop Creek and the Mashel River. Wilson said the river is used in late summer as a water source for the town.

The process of installing a rain garden can be tricky, she added: It's part construction and part landscaping project, and it starts with picking the right spot.

"There's the little bit of technical information, in making sure your soils percolate to have a rain garden," she said, "because what you don't want is to have any of this water standing around for more than 24 hours. Then you start breeding mosquitoes and getting pests that you don't want in your landscape."

Wilson, who oversees school participation in rain garden projects, also has one in her own yard. She said they're very low maintenance and can be planted to attract birds and wildlife.

"I love it!," she exclaimed. "I'm a person who's definitely prone toward the native plants and the habitat aspect of it. I have so many different types of birds in my yard now - and if I just stand still in the summer, I can almost guarantee I'll see a hummingbird."

The WSU extension office in Snohomish County offers rain garden workshops and a website, www.raingarden.wsu.edu with online instructions. That's also where to register a home rain garden, to help meet the goal of having 12,000 throughout the Puget Sound area by 2016.