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BECAUSE COMMUNITY MATTERS

Rain gardens on Hilltop

Project takes aim at water quality

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A collaboration between the city of Tacoma, a church and many volunteers has resulted in three rain gardens on Hilltop.

The native soils and forests of the region store, filter and slowly release water to streams, wetlands and eventually to Puget Sound.

As the population has increased over time, soils and forests have given way to roads, parking lots and rooftops. More and more, water flows from these surfaces into storm drains, bringing with it motor oil, pesticides and fertilizers that end up in Puget Sound.



PHOTO BY JOHN LARSON
VOLUNTEER. Rick Bondon was on wheelbarrow duty.

Rain gardens are one tool being utilized to reverse this trend.

Mae Harris has lived in her home on South 'L' Street for 41 years. Right up the street is Miles Memorial Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, where Reverend Freeman McKindra II is senior pastor.

Harris is active in the neighborhood, from being a block leader for the National Night Out event to being involved with Hilltop Action Coalition.

Recently the city received a grant from Greater Tacoma Community Foundation to establish some rain gardens. Harris was at a meeting with City Manager Eric Anderson when he asked her to suggest a place in town to do this. South 'L' Street was her response.

The original idea was to install rain gardens on parking strips along the street. Later it changed to private property. Harris offered up her front yard. Another resident a block away, Michael Blackwell, offered his front yard as well.

McKindra agreed to a corner of the church's property for the third garden. "I thought these would look nice in our neighborhood," he said. "This is an opportunity for neighborhood people to work together. This is an opportunity to make our community better."

Crews from the city's Public Works Department came by last week to prepare the three sites. They peeled away the layer of lawn and shifted down spouts so water coming out of them would flow into the gardens, rather than the storm drains. "The city workers did an excellent job," McKindra remarked.

David Hymel from the non-profit group Stewardship Partners was brought on board to oversee the project.

The Lowe's store in Lakewood donated 90 percent of the plants for the three sites. He noted the plant species chosen do not need much water in the summer and can handle substantial water in the winter, ideal for the local weather patterns.

They were planted in a mixture of 65 percent native soil and 35 percent of a yard waste product made by LeMay Industries, which provides extra nutrients to the plants. On top of this was placed three to four inches of bark mulch, which holds moisture in the soil and controls weeds.

In one corner of each of the lots, rocks were placed under the layers of soil and mulch. These serve as overflow areas, Hymel explained. In case of heavy rain, the nearby storm drains can take in water that the soil cannot. "Every rain garden needs an escape area," he noted.

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Hymel has worked on many rain garden projects in the region. Most are at schools or community centers. This is the first project he has been involved with that used private homes, and he likes the idea.

"The city felt this was a good neighborhood to invest in," Hymel said. Water percolates well in the soil on Hilltop, he added.

Some volunteers doing the landscaping work on July 11 are members of McKindra's congregation. Others were neighborhood residents, or youth who got involved through Al Davies Boys & Girls Club. Representatives of Maxine Mimms Academy brought coffee and food for the volunteers.

As they wrapped up the work on Harris' front yard, one asked Hymel if he was happy with the result. "I am happy. Are you? This is your neighborhood," he replied.

Harris is happy. "I can't believe it," she said. "I like it very much."

"I hope this starts a re-greening of the Hilltop," Hymel said.

McKindra is pleased that his church could participate in a project that addresses the issue of water quality in Puget Sound. He hopes this trial run on South 'L' Street inspires similar projects around town. "This can be a model for the rest of the city."

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