

SU Showcase to feature University's first rain garden

Syracuse University will soon install its first rain garden to enhance campus sustainability by reducing storm water runoff from the Waverly parking lot. The Waverly Rain Garden, an SU Showcase project, is scheduled to be built on April 10, just outside of the Henry Center on a grass-covered hill within the parking lot, located at the corner of South Crouse and Waverly avenues.

A rain garden is a sunken garden designed to absorb rainwater runoff from surrounding areas such as roofs, driveways, walkways and compacted lawns. Storm water flows into the garden and slowly seeps into the ground, acting as a natural filter for runoff contaminants and reducing the amount of rainwater entering storm drains. This helps to avoid storm system overloads that can cause erosion, water pollution, flooding and diminished groundwater.

The Waverly Rain Garden will cover 400 square feet and capture as much as 260 cubic feet, or nearly 2,000 gallons, of water runoff. It features a low-maintenance design using native plants that are highly tolerant of site conditions, such as salty runoff due to snow removal, and native groundcovers to decrease the amount of mowing required.

The rain garden was designed by SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry landscape architecture graduate student Nick Zubin-Stathopoulos. Alison Carey, a policy studies major in The College of Arts and Sciences, is recruiting volunteers to help build and plant the garden on April 10. Carey developed the initial idea for the garden as an intern at the Syracuse Center of Excellence (SyracuseCoE).

“The rain garden design process included combining elements of storm water management and ecology in order to appropriately size the garden and promote the survival of the plants,” says Zubin-Stathopoulos. “The garden’s size was determined by using calculations based on New York State water quality treatment requirements for the amount of parking lot runoff. Plants selected include salt-tolerant native species such as switch grass and others found in salt marshes around Syracuse. Diversity among the species selected ensures that if some are unable to tolerate the site conditions, more capable species will take their place.”

SU’s main campus contains many potentially ideal rain garden locations because of its numerous paved areas and steep hillsides. This type of terrain can be a significant contributor to excessive storm water runoff, which can overload the storm sewer system and impact surrounding low-lying neighborhoods. Thus, the Waverly Rain Garden site was chosen because of its good potential to capture storm water while also offering students easy access to the garden for educational purposes, says Zubin-Stathopoulos.

SU’s Campus Planning, Design and Construction (CPDC) and Business and Facilities Maintenance Services (BFMS) departments have been instrumental in selecting the rain garden site, which requires no underground obstructions such as utility lines, and in

coordinating construction logistics. Syracuse CoE is providing some materials and technical support for the project. Prior to actually installing the garden, staff from Physical Plant will excavate the site and construct a stone retaining wall. Their grounds crew also will maintain the garden once the installation is complete.

“The location selected seems well suited for this first rain garden installation,” says BFMS director Allan Breese. “The space is underutilized, has plenty of potential rain water available and will drain to the storm water system, if necessary. We will all be monitoring this garden quite carefully.”

Provided construction goes according to schedule, the Waverly Rain Garden will be dedicated during SU Showcase on April 19.

“The timing of this first rain garden and its scheduled dedication fits perfectly with the upcoming SU Showcase ‘sustainability’ theme,” says Rachel May, SU’s coordinator of sustainability education. “The garden’s purpose is also symbolic of SU’s broader commitment to address the University’s impact on the local environment and community.”

May has been overseeing the rain garden’s planning and design efforts, as well as developing many of the other SU Showcase activities.

“We are very excited to include the rain garden in Showcase. It represents the spirit of the event, showcasing the ways in which students, faculty and administration can work together to produce long term benefits for the University,” says Steve Parks, director of SU Showcase and associate professor of writing and rhetoric in The College of Arts and Sciences. “Retaining such a prominent structure on campus that reflects this year’s event theme of environmental sustainability is wonderful. Going forward, I hope every future SU Showcase will leave its own unique legacy as a reflection of that year’s theme.”

“This rain garden project is a superb example of how SU Showcase can serve as a catalyst to bring our students and campus community together to engage creatively with the great challenges of our day, such as environmental sustainability,” says SU Vice Chancellor and Provost Eric F. Spina. “It also encapsulates the notion that addressing such daunting global challenges starts locally, so a rain garden in Syracuse can, and does, make a difference.”

Waverly Rain Garden volunteers are needed to work two-hour shifts from 10 a.m.-4 p.m. on Saturday, April 10, weather permitting, to help install garden layers and place the plants. For more information and to volunteer, contact Carey at aecarey@syr.edu.