

RainWise Frequently Asked Questions

RAINWISE PROGRAM: HOW TO GET STARTED AND WHAT TO EXPECT

What is the RainWise Rebate Program? RainWise is a program offered by Seattle Public Utilities and King County Wastewater Treatment Division to help pay for installing rain water cisterns and/or rain gardens on properties in parts of Seattle to reduce the amount of stormwater runoff going into the combined sewer system. The rebates cover 50 to 100% of the project cost depending on site conditions and customer choices. To receive a rebate, homeowners must live in an eligible RainWise drainage basin. Check eligibility at the RainWise tools web site at www.rainwise.seattle.gov

How can I participate in the RainWise Rebates Program?

1. Check your eligibility by typing in your address at www.rainwise.seattle.gov or if you don't have web access, call the Garden Hotline at 206-633-0224.
2. Get bids and choose a RainWise-trained contractor by clicking on the 'Find Contractor' section at www.rainwise.seattle.gov.
3. Your contractor will handle construction and required inspections.
4. Submit your rebate request forms within 90 days after approval of the inspection and enjoy your RainWise yard.

How much is the average rebate? The average rebate amount is about \$4,400. Currently the program pays \$3.50 per square foot of roof area where the runoff is being directed into a rain garden. For example, if there is 1,000 square feet of roof area being collected, the rebate for a rain garden would be \$3,500. Cisterns (not connected to a rain garden) are rebated at a lower rate because they are not as efficient. The rebate for a cistern will vary depending on the size and number of cisterns. Your contractor will help you figure out what your rebate will be before the project starts.

What do I need to get started? Your address is all you need to check your eligibility at www.rainwise.seattle.gov

**RAINWISE PROGRAM:
HOW TO GET STARTED
AND WHAT TO EXPECT**
.....page 1

**ALL ABOUT RAIN
GARDENS.....page 3**

ALL ABOUT CISTERNS
.....page 5

**WHY AND WHERE WE ARE
DOING THE PROGRAM**
.....page 6

How do I hire and work with a contractor? At www.rainwise.seattle.gov you will find contact information for RainWise trained contractors in the 'Find Contractor' section. Your next step is to contact them directly. Just like with any home remodeling project, you may want to check out several contractors, see examples of their work and check references. Once you find someone you are interested in working with, they will come out, measure your roof, let you know what amount of rebate you are eligible for and you can talk about options. If you chose to move forward, the contractor does a site plan, does a test to make sure your soil percolates in the case of a rain garden installation and schedules a free pre-inspection to get the green light to go ahead and build the system. Once it is built, there is a final inspection and the paperwork is sent in for the rebate to be processed.

Do I have to pay the contractor up front? You and the contractor work out acceptable payment arrangements. The contractors are independent businesses and have their own business practices.

How long does it take to get my rebate? We can generally issue a rebate within six to eight weeks or sooner provided the rebate package is complete and any deficiencies noted on the final inspection have been corrected. Missing items will slow down the process.

Has a rebate ever been denied? So far, we have yet to deny a rebate. Following the program guidelines ensures you will receive a rebate.

I have a small yard. Can I fit a rain garden or cistern? All sites are different. Find out by contacting a RainWise contractor from www.rainwise.seattle.gov and arrange a site visit.

What if I don't have gutters? You must have gutters and downspouts to capture roof runoff and direct it to your rain garden(s) or cistern(s). Installation or repair of gutters is not covered by the rebate.

Is there an appeal process if the website says my property is not eligible or says that it's eligible for only a cistern? If you think you should be eligible, contact rainwise@seattle.gov and we can double check the technical feasibility of your property. We have tried our best to identify eligible properties within distinct combined sewer overflow basins, but no system is perfect. If you are within the basin but not eligible for a rain garden, it may be because you are above, below or on a slope. We do not want to jeopardize the stability of any slopes by infiltrating more water. Or, your lot may not have soil that drains well enough for a rain garden.

If additional work is needed by the contractor after the final inspection, will this be covered by the rebate? This depends on the arrangement you have made with your contractor. If your contractor is basing their estimate on the labor and materials it takes to build the rain garden or install the cistern and these hours exceed the rebate amount, then you may need to pay more. When you negotiate with your contractor you may want to raise this possibility and talk through possible solutions. Corrections following inspections tend to be fairly minor and take little time.

Where can I see completed rain gardens and rain cisterns? Online resources include:

1. Map of RainWise projects at: <https://rainwise.seattle.gov/city/seattle/map>.
2. “Virtual” tour published by Sustainable Ballard (Seattle) at <http://sustainableballard.org/wiki/VirtualTour>
3. Map of rain gardens all over the region, including many in Seattle neighborhoods at: <http://www.12000raingardens.org/index.phtml>(Stewardship Partners, as part of the "12,000 Rain Gardens in Puget Sound" campaign)

We also hold periodic tours of completed installations, watch the ‘Current Events’ page at www.rainwise.seattle.gov for information.

ALL ABOUT RAIN GARDENS

What is a rain garden? A rain garden is a shallow depression containing spongy soil and a variety of plants that thrive in northwest sun, soil and moisture conditions. A RainWise rain garden collects water from your roof downspout and allows it to safely soak into the ground.

How do I maintain my rain garden?

1. The RainWise Program requires that contractors put down three inches of mulch to hold in moisture, prevent weeds and better absorb stormwater. You will want to replenish the mulch at least once a year to maintain a mulch depth of 3-4 inches. The best mulch is “arborist wood chips” – you can get them free if a tree service is working in your neighborhood. Wood chip or coarse bark mulch from a garden store works well too.
2. Water your plants for the first one to two summers. Soaker hoses can make this easier.
3. Weed by hand or with a long-handled weed puller. Get weeds early in the spring before they go to seed or make deep roots. Weed again in late spring, and again in early and late fall. Watch for invasive weeds that spread by roots (like ivy or morning glory) and be sure to dig out the entire root! Don’t use chemicals to remove weeds.

How big is an average RainWise rain garden? The size of your rain garden will be in proportion to the amount of runoff from the roof that you choose to divert to the garden. To be eligible for a RainWise rebate, the rain garden must control a minimum of 400 square feet of water from your roof. A rain garden with good soil (“good” rain garden soil soaks up rain water well) that controls the minimum roof area can be as small as 28 square feet. If space is a consideration, adding a cistern can reduce the size of a rain garden. Additionally, different roof areas can be directed into a separate rain garden.

What types of plants are in rain gardens? Are there required types of plants? You will work with your contractor on plant selection based on what you like and the conditions of your property (sun or shade). Plants in rain gardens have unique requirements. You will choose plants for the garden’s base that like wet conditions, plants on the sides that can take wet or dry soil and plants on the top that are drought-tolerant in the summertime. RainWise requires a mix of deciduous and evergreen plants to provide four-season coverage. (Having evergreen plants in the winter helps “slow the flow” and provides multi –season interest.

Native plants are not required, but they do work well in rain gardens as they evolved here to our particular climate and usually have habitat value for birds and pollinators. The Rain Garden Handbook (http://county.wsu.edu/mason/nrs/water/Documents/Raingarden_handbook.pdf) has lists of well adapted plants that provide good examples.

Do I get to choose where on my property to place the rain garden?

Yes, you will work with your contractor to decide this. Placement of the rain garden can be anywhere in your yard as long as it meets RainWise program requirements such as setback from buildings, property lines and the availability of an appropriate discharge point.

Should I be concerned about moss in my rain garden? No. Having moss in the garden is just part of living in the northwest. Moss is a healthy addition to the other plants that will help soak up and filter the stormwater flowing into your rain garden. Please don't use any chemical that kills or removes moss in your rain garden.

Is it safe to eat food plants that are grown in my rain garden? There aren't enough documented studies for us to say these edible plants are safe for consumption. Contaminants from roofing materials may flow off the roof and into your garden. Metal roof tops are generally considered safer and installing a "first flush" valve on your cistern so that the first rains (which contain possibly more contaminants) are diverted from the cistern and rain garden will also help.

What is the life expectancy of a rain garden?

Rain gardens just get better with age! As the plants get larger and microbes in the soil multiply, your rain garden will absorb and filter stormwater more and more effectively. To keep your rain garden working at its best, be sure to follow maintenance practices (mulching, weeding and watering (for the first year or two)). The PVC pipes are the only part of the installation that may need replacement if they aren't painted. These pipes take your stormwater from the roof or cistern and may become brittle if they're not painted for protection against UV rays. All contractors are responsible for informing the homeowner that the pipes should be painted to last longer.

Will the rebates cover the cost of removing a tree if it's in the way of a rain garden? No. A tree has stormwater value as well. It is far better to keep the tree to catch and absorb the rain and locate your rain garden in a different place to achieve additional stormwater management.

Will the rebate cover the cost of removing impervious paving/asphalt? The rebate will cover the cost of removal for only the area that will be replaced by a rain garden. If the patio or other impervious surface is far bigger than a rain garden, the full cost will not be covered.

Can a rain garden be used to capture spring water that is a problem on my property or in my alley? No, rebates are only for capturing stormwater off of your roof. Rain gardens should only be installed in areas that drain well.

Do rain gardens attract mosquitoes? A rain garden is not a pond, which tends to attract mosquitoes. The rain garden will hold standing water for less time than it mosquito larvae need to hatch. Also, mosquitoes generally show up during the summer when there isn't much rain. <http://www.kingcounty.gov/healthservices/health/ehs/westnile.aspx>

Can my kids play in the rain garden? No, children should not play in a rain garden, as the soils need to be loose so they stay absorbent and walking on them will cause soil compaction.

ALL ABOUT CISTERNS

What is a rainwater cistern (also called a rain tank)? A cistern is a large above-ground container used to collect roof water. It is like a huge rain barrel and can hold 200 or more gallons of water. During the winter months, cisterns store rain to reduce the amount of stormwater runoff entering the sewer system. A special valve (called a "low flow orifice"), which is kept open, allows all the captured rain to **slowly** drain out. Cisterns can drain into a rain garden, into the landscape, or to a side sewer connection. In April-May, the valve can be closed and the rain can be collected for some summer watering .

How does a rainwater cistern work? What about maintenance?

1. Check cistern screen for debris each week.
2. Check the inside of your cistern once a year (August-September before rains return) to remove any sediment that passed through the screen.
3. Check the low-flow orifice to make sure it is working
4. Keep the low flow orifice valve open during the fall-winter months. This will allow excess water to safely and slowly exit the cistern.
5. Close the overflow valve in May to start saving for summer watering.

It is easy to open and close the release valve. Your contractor will show you how.

Will my cistern get algae in it? The cisterns approved for use in RainWise are opaque and won't allow light in for algae to grow. Cisterns still require minimal maintenance (see cistern maintenance) but algae should not be a problem to control.

What is the life expectancy of a cistern installation? The cisterns have a life expectancy of at least 20 years.

Can a rain water cistern be used for in-home water uses, such as flushing toilets and doing laundry? While cisterns can be used in this manner, we do not currently rebate or have any incentives for these kinds of systems. To be eligible for a RainWise rebate, the cistern must be equipped with a low flow orifice that drains the tank from September through May, because the focus of the program is to control stormwater runoff. Rain water harvesting for indoor uses requires specialized plumbing and permits. We recommend careful planning, securing required permits, and working with a contractor if you choose to pursue this. More info can be found at http://www.seattle.gov/util/EnvironmentConservation/MyLawnGarden/Rain_Water_Harvesting/index.htm

WHY AND WHERE WE ARE DOING THE PROGRAM

What is the purpose of RainWise rain gardens and cisterns? By having rain gardens and cisterns on private property, Seattle residents help soak up and filter rain rather than having it run off their property and overwhelming the sewer and storm drainage system. In RainWise eligible areas, the storm and sewer pipes are combined. In a combined system, large rains can cause sewer overflows into the nearest waterway. Stormwater also carries dirt, oil and metals from cars, lawn chemicals, cleaners and pet waste into local waterways.

We can all slow the flow of runoff from our rooftops by taking simple steps that make our yards act more like a forest, with absorbent soil. If we capture the rain water in a large cistern, it can provide some water during the summer.

Why are King County and Seattle Public Utilities (SPU) providing this funding? SPU and King County are working to control combined sewer overflows in Seattle using a combination of traditional solutions (constructing big pipes and storage tanks) and “green” infrastructure solutions like rain gardens and rain cisterns. As part of that investment, RainWise rebates are helping residents reduce stormwater runoff from their property in certain areas of Seattle where combined sewer overflows happen.

What is a combined sewer overflow (CSO)? In Seattle, like many older cities, sewer pipes carry both wastewater (all the water that comes from toilets and down the drain in homes and businesses) and stormwater (rain or snow that washes off streets and parking lots) to a sewage treatment plant. In many parts of Seattle, the mixed wastewater and stormwater flow together in a single pipe. This is called a combined sewer system.

During a heavy rain, the pipes may fill up and start to overflow into a nearby waterway. When this happens, it's called a [Combined Sewer Overflow \(CSO\)](#). This provides a "safety valve" that prevents back-ups of untreated wastewater into homes and businesses, flooding in city streets, or bursting underground pipes.

The Combined Sewer System was built as [Seattle grew during the early 1900s](#) as an economical way to handle wastewater and stormwater. One advantage of this system is that, most of the time when rainfall is low to moderate both the stormwater and wastewater go to the treatment plant before being discharged to Puget Sound.

How are RainWise-eligible areas chosen? RainWise rebates are available only in areas where combined sewer overflows occur and where implementing RainWise can help solve the problem cost-effectively. RainWise rain gardens and cisterns provide extra capacity in the system.

Additional eligible RainWise areas are slated to be added in the future, so check www.rainwise.seattle.gov periodically to check the eligibility of the area where you live.

My house is pretty new, can I still participate in the program?

No, new construction (anything built after 1980) falls under the stormwater code, and as such should be dealing with their stormwater via green stormwater to the maximum extent feasible. RainWise is a retrofit program, so all new construction projects requiring a building permit triggering stormwater code should be ineligible for a rebate

Am I eligible for a reduction in my stormwater fee if I install a system?

Depending on the size of your property, you may be eligible for the Stormwater Facility Credit Program (SFCP) if you install a qualifying system. Information on the program and qualifying systems can be found by searching “Stormwater Facility Credit” on www.Seattle.gov or go directly to www.seattle.gov/util/forbusinesses/drainagesewerbusinesses/stormwaterfacilitycredit/

I’m not in a target basin; can I still install a rain garden or rainwater cistern?

Yes, but you will not be eligible for a rebate. Doing this will help the environment and give you the benefits of having a rain garden (beautiful landscape, helps with drainage around house, provides habitat for birds and pollinators) or a cistern (source of irrigation water in summer).

What else can I do to help protect our waterways and Puget Sound?

Besides slowing the flow of storm runoff with RainWise rain gardens and cisterns, it’s also important to keep it clean, to protect our streams, lakes and Puget Sound. Here are some ways you can help:

- Don’t use pesticides
- Fertilize moderately
- Clean up pet waste
- Keep soap, cleaners, paints etc. out of storm drains.
- Fix oil and fluid leaks in cars

For more, visit www.kingcounty.gov/environment/wtd/Education/ThingsYouCanDo or www.seattle.gov/restoreourwaters