

Seven Years Later ~ A Rain Garden Reflection

by Sue Ellingson, 2008
www.sueellingson.com/raingardens

I dug my rain garden seven years ago. I wish I'd had more advice at the time. These plants are fighters and once they've settled in, evicting them is like going to war.

My garden was mostly shady at first. Then a big old hackberry cracked and the city cut it down. And the sun shone on plants that really weren't so thrilled about it. It still isn't *sunny* sunny, more like partly sunny.

Anyway, here we go: Sue's rain garden thoughts seven years later.

Avoid too-tall plants

In 2001, I planted Joe Pye weed (*Eupatorium maculatum*). In fact, it's a lovely plant. Pinkish flowers work up to blooming in August and draw tiger swallowtails. I've put up with it far longer than I otherwise would have because the tiger swallowtails draw me.

But last summer one stalk topped out at nine feet. Nine feet! This from a plant that seldom reaches more than five feet. A nine foot plant is terrific for a public park, but entirely too much for my little urban lot. (I think a shorter variety is now available.)

And frankly, it's only nine feet high when it's standing up. Too many summers have passed with the plant sprawled across the garden after a storm knocked it flat.

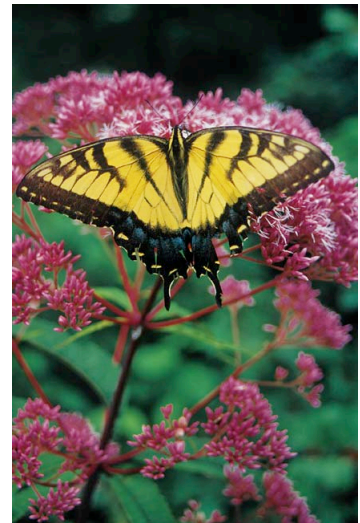
Brown-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia triloba*) and meadow rue are also good-but-too-tall plants that I wish I'd avoided.

Think of it as a meadow

It's good to have a lot of grass or sedge in a rain garden. It competes with the too-tall plants and keeps them in check. And it puts down lots of roots, all over, improving infiltration. There were two obstacles to my rain garden having a lot of grass.

The first was the "garden" vision in my head. Flowers, flowers, flowers. No grass in the picture. So I chose a lot of flowering plants and very few grasses. Now it's too late. The forbs dominate the garden. Grasses and sedges added afterward have never gotten big enough to reach above the forbs' leaves. I wish I had opened my mind to a little urban meadow.

The second problem was the lack of sun. Grass likes sun and is never happy without it. When you see a picture of a savannah—a sea of grass with a few scattered trees—there are always more forbs and less grass in the shade of the trees. So I never would have had a lot of grass or sedge, but I could have done better than almost none.



More thoughts

- Some plants are just too small or unassertive to have much of an impact on the garden, even though they're lovely. Liatris, prairie onion, and bottlebrush grass, for example.
- In a wild garden, plants come, and go, and come again. Relax and let it happen. I used to worry that the hundreds of lavender hyssop seedlings would take over. One year I took a chance—and *didn't* dig them up. They were fine.
- Plants crowd the sidewalk in summer. I trim them with hedge trimmers. One year I made a small fence with bamboo lashed together. It worked well, too, to keep the walk clear.
- People often ask about downspouts that empty onto a driveway. A rain barrel can serve well. (So I've been told; I haven't had one.) www.rainfordane.org
- I don't ever burn my garden, I cut it cut down. So tree seedlings always need pulling. Creeping bellflower has also crept in and I worry about this terrible plant taking over. (Although the problematic Joe Pye weed completely dominates it.)
- I wonder whether a rain garden of shrubs would be effective. I don't know the answer to this.
- I really enjoy having goldfinches picking seeds off the seed heads in the fall. The garden has had a toad, hawk moths, hummingbirds, a monarch caterpillar, and many more creatures.

A native garden right outside your door

Sarah Stein, the author of *Noah's Garden*, suggested that everyone should have a bit of native garden *right next to their door*. Native plants co-evolved with native creatures and they depend on one another for survival. When you pass a native garden every day, you'll see how other creatures in this ecosystem benefit from even a small oasis of native plants. And the idea of native landscaping will sell itself.

Don't miss it, folks. It's a fabulous experience.

Results for plants in and around my rain garden

Grasses

Bromus ciliatus	fringed brome grass	Lovely, drooping seed heads.
Elymus hystrix	bottlebrush grass	Attractive seed heads, but a small, unassertive plant.

Forbs

Agastache foeniculum	lavender hyssop	I like this plant, though the blossoms are nothing. Barely any lavender. But they're a perfect size and goldfinches love them.
Allium cernuum	prairie onion	Small. Lovely blossoms.
Anemone canadensis	Canada anemone	A favorite. It has a reputation for being too aggressive, but I've never had trouble with it.
Asclepias incarnata	milkweed	Milkweed is the only plant monarchs will lay eggs on. I was happy to see monarch caterpillar this summer.
Aster laevis	smooth aster	
Aster lateriflorus	side-flowering aster	A volunteer, but very nice.
Aster novae-angliae	New England aster	Always falls down.

Baptisia australis	blue false indigo	Native to the US south of Wis. Slow growing. A terrific plant.
Eupatorium maculatum	Joe Pye weed	Too tall.
Liatris spicata	liatris	Small. Pretty.
Monarda fistuosa	bee balm	Very nice plant, but <i>always</i> gets powdery mildew.
Oxalis stricta	comon yellow oxalis	Volunteer. Grows everywhere but isn't troublesome.
Ratibida pinnata	gray-head coneflower	
Rudbeckia hirta (R fulgida)	black-eyed Susan	Rudbeckia fulgida is not native to Wis, but a very nice plant.
Rudbeckia triloba	brown-eyed Susan	Too tall.
Silene stellata	starry campion	
Thalictrum dasycarpum	meadow rue	Pretty plant, but too tall.
Tradescantia ohioensis	spiderwort	

Spring ephemerals

Aquilegia canadensis	columbine	spring – Often spectacular, but short-lived.
Arisaema triphyllum	Jack-in-the-pulpit	spring
Polemonium reptans	Jacob's ladder	spring
Dodecatheon meadia	shooting star	spring
Mertensia virginica	Virginia bluebells	spring

Shrubs

Aronia abutifolia	red chokeberry	shrub – failed
Cornus alternifolia	pagoda dogwood	small multi-stemmed tree – Awesome plant! Chipmunks eat the berries.
Corylus americana	American hazelnut	shrub – Going like gangbusters.

Failed plants – There are spectacular plants here that failed and I don't know why.

Actaea rubra	red baneberry	failed
Asarum canadense	wild ginger	failed – A woodland plant that got too much sun.
Cassia hebecarpa	wild senna	failed
Echinacea purpurea	purple coneflower	failed – Killed by a virus common in this species.
Helenium autumnale	sneezeweed	failed
Lobelia cardinalis	cardinal flower	failed – Attracts hummingbirds.
Lythrum alatum	winged loosestrife	failed
Solidago riddellii (I think)	goldenrod	failed
Trillium grandiflorum	trillium	failed – A woodland plant that got too much sun.
Veronicastrum virginicum	Culver's root	failed – Planted too close to the Joe Pye weed.
Zizia aurea	golden Alexander	failed – A favorite, but I think it needs more wet.
Elymus villosus	silky wild rye grass	failed
Sporobolus heterolepis	prairie dropseed	failed – A terrific plant.
Carex	sedge, 3 varieties	failed – Always shorter than the forbs