



The rapid change of our farms, fields and forests to urban and suburban areas is profoundly altering how water flows during and after storm events. When we develop land, vegetation and topsoil are removed to make way for buildings, homes, roads, and infrastructure. This loss of water-slurping soil, plants, and trees causes stormwater from rain and melting snow to travel faster over impervious surfaces, pick up more pollutants along the way, and flood streams in shorter, concentrated bursts. Seemingly inconspicuous, stormwater runoff is now one of the biggest threats facing our fresh water and accounts for an estimated 70% of all water pollution.

Enter our yards. Lawns in the United States now cover more land than any one crop – approximately 40 million acres. Thinking of our yard as a stormwater sponge is a powerful reminder that we can make simple choices and small changes on our property to drastically improve our water and soil quality. Throughout 2024, the Geauga Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) has been promoting backyard conservation practices as effective ways to conserve and improve natural resources, while making our outdoor living spaces more attractive and enjoyable. Just as they do on farmland, conservation practices on nonagricultural land and around our homes (i.e. our yards) can keep rain where it falls, minimize stormwater runoff and pollution, provide wildlife habitat, and improve soil health and landscape beauty. There are so many things we can do to incorporate backyard conservation practices. Let the following list fuel your motivation and inspiration!

### **Turn your Spoils into Healthy Soil by Composting**

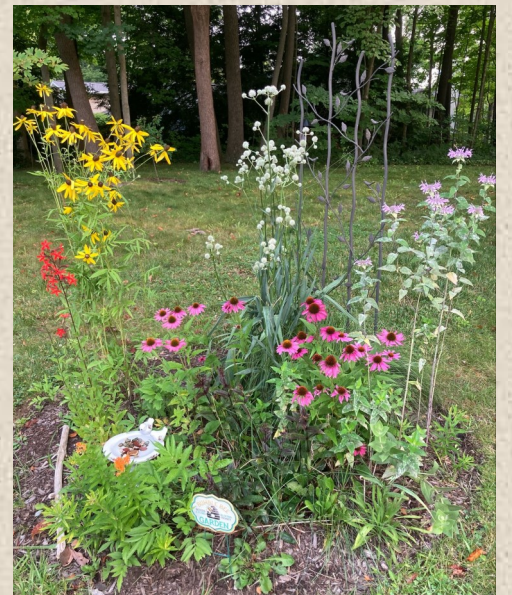
Composting accelerates the natural decomposition processes to recycle organic material into a useable soil enrichment product for yards and gardens. Diverting food and yard waste from landfills and increasing carbon sequestration are just a few of the many benefits to composting. There are so many methods of composting available, so do some research prior to purchasing or building a bin to see what works best for your situation. It can be as simple or as complex as you make it so remember that no matter what... compost happens! Experience will tell you what works best so try not get too buried in the details. Just take that leap and start your heap!

### **Rain Today? Water Tomorrow with Rain Barrels**

By collecting rooftop runoff for watering landscapes, lawns, and flower gardens, these often-repurposed food grade plastic barrels help save water, alleviate flooding, and reduce stormwater pollution. Because there are a few different types and ways to set up a rain barrel, research is again recommended first so you can decide the most efficient and effective way to install your barrel to meet your needs. Barrels can be found in many retail stores, online, and at many soil and water conservation districts (including Geauga!) so be sure to shop around and make a solid plan before making a purchase.

### **Landscape for the Long Haul with Native Plants & Trees**

Though you have probably never considered your yard to be a wildlife preserve, it truly is! Plants are the critical base of the food chain for almost all ecosystems, making food from the sun's energy, then passing that energy through chains of insects, birds, mammals, and more as they eat and are eaten. The unique and intricate relationships within these food webs have developed over thousands of years and through thousands of generations within a community. That's why it is so important to plant native plants and trees... our local wildlife cannot survive without them! And while the planting season might appear to be winding down, autumn is actually a good window to plant natives because the season provides ideal conditions that encourage new growth and healthy roots.



### **Plant them so they Slow the Flow**

While we are on the topic of planting, did you know that nothing can slow water movement or prevent flooding like deeply rooted native plants and trees?! Studies have shown that native plants and trees landscaped in residential developments can decrease stormwater runoff by 65%. In fact, even just one tree can absorb hundreds of gallons of stormwater annually. In contrast, a typical lawn has minimal root depth and less than 10% of the water absorption capacity of a natural woodland. Whether installing a buffer along your stream, a perimeter of trees, a wildflower meadow, or a rain garden, consider turning some of your turf into a conservation practice to capture more rainwater and slow the flow.

### **Rake Up the Rewards when you Leave the Leaves**

Are you feeling the approaching dread of raking dead leaves? As autumn leaves descend upon us, instead of raking (and cursing!) them, we can look at leaves differently before we rake, mow, and blow. Many people don't realize that most insects and invertebrates overwinter right where they spent all summer. They are just less active and more hidden... insulated from the elements in our fallen leaves and organic debris. Consider dedicating some areas of your yard as places to leave the leaves! Mulching leaves with a lawn mower will also save time while adding organic matter and nutrients to the soil, improving infiltration, and reducing runoff. Leaves also prevents the growth of weeds and act like a blanket keeping tender plant roots warm in the chilly winter months. Researchers have found that mulching leaves in the fall results in a greener lawn and up to 80% less dandelions the following spring.

Perhaps the transition of the seasons will inspire us to make a few changes to our own habits and habitats. Contact your local SWCD for more information and resources on any of these backyard conservation practices. Whether you have a large country lot, a suburban spot, or a tiny city plot, now's the time to re-imagine your yard and "grow for it" with backyard conservation!