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## Gardens With a Purpose: Winter Haven's Rain Gardens Help Lake Water Quality

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NEWS CHIEF

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WINTER HAVEN | Rain gardens are spreading like scattered showers around the heart of Winter Haven.

And the city will soon have \$400,000 to create more of them, with the funds coming mostly from grants. There are now 44 city-built rain gardens in the core of the downtown, with plans to double that in the next few years.

For two of the city supervisors responsible for managing flooding and controlling lake water quality and levels, this question answers itself:

Which is better: Rain that washes across streets and parking lots and makes its way — with assorted crud, harmful nutrients and debris — into storm drains and then into lakes, or, rain that simply soaks into the ground and refreshes the Floridan aquifer?

And that's where Winter Haven's aggressive installation of rain gardens comes in.

"We're changing 25 years of what wasn't working out the way we hoped," said Mike Britt, director of Winter Haven's Natural Resources Division.

Rain gardens are intended to catch water running off buildings; or, in some cases, runoff is directed into the gardens.

The area is dug about 9 to 12 inches down to retain excess water, and the soil should be sandy for fast drainage. Plants in the garden should be able to handle Florida's sun, summer rains and dry winters.

Two plants that do exceedingly well are muhley grass and swamp sunflower, according to M. J. Carnevale, a natural resources program manager for Winter Haven.

The Winter Haven Ridge in the center of the city offers the sandy soil needed for rain gardens. The city has a 10-year goal of building 250 rain gardens in the region roughly bordered by lakes Howard, Elbert, Lulu and Conine.

Officials would like to see another 250 built by home and business owners and say they're willing to lend technical advice for people to do so.

When The Ledger last wrote about Winter Haven's rain gardens, in February 2014, about half of the planned 44 gardens on city property had been built, and now they've been completed. They include 20 rain gardens along and near Second Street.

Half of the \$240,000 spent for those rain gardens came from the Southwest Florida Water Management District and the other half from the city.



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Muhley grass and swamp sunflowers grow in the rain garden at Nora Mayo Hall. The rain garden, located at 500 3rd St NW in Winter Haven, was finished last year.

The city is now looking at a bonanza of state and Swiftmud money to spend on rain gardens over the next three years. It will receive \$160,000 from the Florida Legislature and another \$120,000 from Swiftmud that has to be matched with \$120,000 of city money.

That's \$400,000 to spend on rain gardens.

Carnevale said the city may be able to do as many as 50 more rain gardens with that money, some of them big projects.

Not only do rain gardens improve lake water quality by subtracting harmful substances from storm water runoff, they also can help keep lake water levels steadier, with less huge influxes of storm water.

The major pollutants are the nutrients phosphorus and nitrogen, city officials say, and once they get into the lakes they're difficult and expensive to remove.

Britt said almost half of the water from the public water system is used for irrigation. He said grass is often watered, but rain gardens never need watering.

Kerry Wilson is president of Six/Ten LLC, a major downtown land and building owner.

Wilson said the company has planted two rain gardens on downtown property, including the RainGarden Apartments, a block off Central Avenue.

"They take up some parking spaces, but they're worth it," Wilson said.

He said the company is planning more rain gardens because they are critical to the city's plans and are the right thing to do.

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