

East Metro Water Resource Education Program partners with University of Minnesota to study landscaping practices that benefit water quality

The 2008 list of impaired waters created by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency includes 1,475 impairments on 336 rivers and 510 lakes. These lakes and rivers are considered unfit for their “designated uses,” such as fishing or swimming. In the east metro area, many of the most popular waterways are on the impaired list, including Forest Lake (PCB in fish tissue), Lake Jane (mercury in fish tissue), Lake Elmo (PFOS in fish tissue), Lily, Long and McKusick Lakes in Stillwater as well as Battle Creek, Carver, Markgrafs, Wilmes and Colby Lakes in Woodbury (phosphorus) and both the St. Croix River (phosphorus) and the Mississippi River (PCB, PFOS and mercury in fish tissue, mercury in the water column, and turbidity).

The East Metro Water Resource Education Program, which was created in 2006 as a partnership between cities, watersheds and county agencies in Washington County, would like more people to landscape their yards with native plants and raingardens to help improve local water quality. Plants native to Minnesota are often deep-rooted, which helps to prevent erosion. They also require less water and no fertilizer or chemicals. Native plants, shrubs and trees are especially important along shoreline property, where they stabilize shoreline and help to filter out pollutants before they are washed into the water. Raingardens are specialized gardens designed to collect stormwater as it runs off of rooftops, driveways and roads and soak the water into the ground where pollutants are removed by filtration. Raingardens are often planted with native plants but function with horticultural varieties or shrubs as well. To help promote the use of native plants, raingardens and shoreline plantings, the East Metro program has teamed up with Blue Thumb – Planting for Clean Water (www.BlueThumb.org) to connect local homeowners with nurseries, design tips, grants and more.

This summer, the East Metro Water Resource Education Program is working with researcher Kay Qualley to determine the best ways to promote native plants, raingardens and shoreline plantings, particularly for people living in Oakdale, Woodbury, Cottage Grove and other communities in southern Washington County where development has boomed in recent years. Qualley is studying environmental horticulture at the University of Minnesota. She is also the prior owner of a landscape design and development firm in Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

For the next three months, Qualley will be investigating the success of existing Blue Thumb outreach efforts in the southern half of the county by interviewing residents and setting up a series of focus groups. She will also be developing recommendations for how the East Metro Water Resource Education Program can better reach people living in those communities.

This project is supported through student research assistance provided by Neighborhood Planning for Community Revitalization, a program of the University of Minnesota’s Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA).

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