

She's got it made in the shade

Local watershed educator Dawn Pape speaks to hundreds of people each year about landscaping for clean water. The mastermind behind the Blue Thumb program and a Master Gardener herself, one of Pape's biggest pet peeves is when people complain that nothing will grow in their shady yards. "Here!" she'll say, thrusting a colorful brochure into their hands, "This is a list of 40 plants, all native to Minnesota and half of which grow perfectly in the shade."

As Pape and many other gardeners have discovered, the trick to landscaping a shady yard is to plant the right thing. Turf grass almost never grows well in the shade, but many plants like ferns, hostas, wild ginger, Pennsylvania sedge and sweet grass actually prefer the shade. There are also a rainbow assortment of woodland flowers that will grow quite nicely in shady yards - red columbine, white bloodroot, purple harebells and yellow marsh marigold, to name a few.

For proof that a shady yard can be beautiful, one need look no further than Jackie Metelak's home in Mahtomedi. Nestled in a quiet cul-de-sac alongside tiny Lake Washington, the home is surrounded by mature pines. Neighboring yards are equally tree-filled, making it appear almost as if the neighborhood was built in the middle of a forest. It's easy to forget that Metelak lives just minutes from the Hwy 36 and 694 interchange; approaching her home one has the impression of being up north at the cabin.

A Master Gardener and member of the Mahtomedi Area Garden Club, Metelak's yard is clearly an expression of her love for gardening. There are lush green hostas in yellow, mint and forest green. Spiky leaved sedges contrast with feathery ferns, while false Solomon's seals droop delicately, exposing bright red berries. In the backyard, a swath of shade-loving and woodland plants leads down to the edge of the lake, adding to the natural beauty of the setting. In the front and back yards, only two small patches of lawn grass remain. Instead, there are stepping stone trails leading through the plantings, with mulch spread in the spaces between plants.

This year, Jackie Metelak worked with Rusty Schmidt, a landscape ecologist with the Washington Conservation District, to make her already eco-friendly yard even better. She installed an innovative rainwater collection system in her driveway, as well as a small front yard raingarden and a shoreline planting in the backyard. A \$3000 cost-share grant from the Rice Creek Watershed District helped to reduce the overall cost of the project.

Not to be outdone by the gardens, Metelak's driveway features several innovative features that are both attractive and reduce stormwater pollution to the nearby lake. Three artfully placed sections of grassy pavement reduce the impervious surface of the driveway. Grassy pave is strong enough to drive on, but allows grasses and low-growing groundcover plants to grow through a plastic framework and rainwater and melting snow are able to soak through into the ground instead of running off into the street and storm sewer system. Additionally, the bottom half of Metelak's driveway was built with porous pavers, which allow water to soak through as well.

In most porous pavement driveways, rainwater soaks into a layer of rocks and sand below the pavers before eventually percolating down into the ground. For her project, however, Metelak chose to install an underground rain storage tank that can hold up to 2100 gallons of water. The tank is equipped with a pump, so Metelak is now using

rainwater to irrigate her many gardens during dry summer months. According to Schmidt, who helped to design the driveway, “Not only is Jackie’s driveway capturing 100% of the stormwater runoff from 90% of all rain events during the year, but it’s also the prettiest driveway I’ve ever seen.”

While Jackie Metelak has clearly taken the extra large step to beautify her home and reduce her impact on local water resources, other homeowners need not go to such extremes to improve their landscaping. The Blue Thumb website (www.BlueThumb.org) is a good starting point. It features a plant selector tool that identifies good plants for shady, sunny, wet and dry soils, as well as links to native plant nurseries and local landscaping companies that specialize in raingardens and shoreline gardens.

The best way to learn about grants and assistance available for different portions of Washington County is to contact the Conservation District at 651-275-1136. In Ramsey County, people can call 651-266-7275. Conservation District staff can set up a free site visit to recommend plantings and trouble-shoot erosion and drainage problems, as well as providing the design for cost-share grant projects.

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