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Let it flow slow: Mountain Garden Club planting rain garden at Children Unlimited to protect groundwater

By [Tom Eastman](#)

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CONWAY — An unkempt corner of Children Unlimited's otherwise landscaped front yard is about to get a little TLC, thanks to the Mountain Garden Club, with more than a little help from Mother Nature.

The front left parcel is to be planted in early June as a rain garden, according to master gardener Ralph Lutjen of the garden club. The new project will add to the landscaping volunteer work performed by the garden club at the site for Children Unlimited, according to Children Unlimited executive director Jackie Sparks, who said the building was built in 2008.

Lutjen has selected a group of hardy plants that will be able to withstand the harsh environment while serving the purpose of slowing down the speed of runoff from Children Unlimited's roof and parking lot as the rainwater seeps into the soil.

"By planting there, we will be improving the area's water quality by slowing the drainage down. The garden acts as an infiltration device so that it dissipates [runoff] materials that ordinarily flow into our lakes and streams. There's silt in the runoff, everything from materials in asphalt like residue from engines and salt, and silt buildup that is a result of erosion caused by fast-moving water, particularly when we have a storm," said Lutjen, a resident of Madison who serves as chair of the garden club's environmental committee.

"If you don't have the right medium in the ground," he added, "the water finds its way into the closest body of water and picks up all sorts of materials in its path. So the idea is to grow plants so the ground acts as a filtering device and dissipates those kinds of things. So that's the principle of what we are doing — which is trying to encourage nature to do the right thing."

Lutjen says many municipalities have planted rain gardens in recent years.

The idea for doing a rain garden at the non-profit Children Unlimited came about after a guest speaker — Durham's town planner — gave a presentation to the garden club at one of its monthly meetings last year.

That led to a discussion, with club board member John Bruni of Jackson spearheading the effort. The club has been doing volunteer work at Children Unlimited for the past few years, according to Lutjen.

The club obtained a \$1,100 grant from the Clean Air-Cool Planet Community Catalyst Fund. It also received a \$985 grant from the Pequawket Foundation.

Other local businesses have responded by supplying materials.

“We're asking local businesses to make contributions in cash or in kind,” said Lutjen.

The club has also been working with Jenn Andrews and her fellow members of the Mount Washington Valley Green Team.

“We have had conversations with Jenn and she has given us ideas of where to look for support, and she has also expressed an interest to volunteer or to help with the installation of the plants,” said Lutjen.

He said he has selected shrubs and perennial flowers for the site, which is in a low-lying area that “gets pretty wet.”

“The plants I've selected are ones which can deal with somewhat severe conditions. The roots there will be wet for periods of time, because it is a low-lying area where the water drains off the roof and into this area before going into the ground,” said Lutjen.

He says the garden club will help weed the site.

“There is no such thing as a garden that doesn't need work — so there will be some weeding on a fairly regular basis. Some may not winter over, so there will be some replacements in future years, but hopefully, we can create conditions under which these plants will do their thing. My hope,” said Lutjen, “is that they will start propagating and the good news will be that we will have plants that thrive.”

The plants that are selected are intended to attract birds and other wildlife.

“We are selecting plants that will encourage birds and butterflies as a learning experience for the children,” said Lutjen.

Plants that Lutjen has chosen include: Fraser fir, Winterberry, Swamp Azalea-Rhododendron, Rodosier Dogwood, Dwarf Inkberry, Mapleleaf Viburnum, Black-eyed Susan, Spiderwort, Grey Feather, Garden Phlox, and Ornamental Grass.

As part of the project, the garden club plans to erect a tablet that will explain what a rain garden is and which will also describe the particular plants that are located in the garden.

“We hope they will get an understanding of nature and the effect of how we are protecting the groundwater,” said Lutjen.

Donations toward the effort may be directed to: Rain Garden Project, Mountain Garden Club, P.O. Box 913, North Conway, 03860.



Master gardener Ralph Lutjen of the Mountain Garden Club and Jackie Sparks of Children Unlimited are shown near the spot where the garden club is planning to plant a rain garden to protect local groundwater. (JAMIE GEMMITI PHOTO)
