

"I Never Promised You a Rain Garden"
by Phylis Dryden

In 1972, at about the same time country western singer Lynn Anderson was flooding the airwaves with her hit song, "I Never Promised You a Rose Garden," Congress passed the Clean Water Act in response to the flooding of our nation's waterways with pollutants.

Composer Joe South's lyrics are central to understanding a major source of water pollution in this country: "Along with the sunshine, there's gotta be a little rain sometime." Rain water (along with melting snow) runs off our nation's paved roadways, its asphalt parking lots, and its rooftops, making its polluted way to local streams and finally to major rivers and bays.

Joining the pollutants of asphalt particles, motor oil, gasoline and other chemicals are the flotsam and jetsam of our throw-away society – the cigarette butts tossed carelessly into the street; the myriad of cellophane wrappers, paper tissues and plastic products thoughtlessly discarded; the accumulation of pet wastes, and so on.

If a person collected the runoff water coming down the paved streets near our homes and poured it into a glass, no reasonable human being on earth would drink it. In order to clean up our collective acts (and our waterways), our municipal leaders have had to enact "storm water management policies" and practices. Surprisingly, the solutions are sometimes quite beautiful.

As a member of the Lebanon County Clean Water Alliance since 2012, I have attended numerous meetings of this dedicated group. One of the most interesting of these was held at Coleman's Park on July 29, when Charlotte Katzenmoyer, Director of Public Works for Lancaster City, described a few of the projects undertaken there.

Instead of drab parking lots, with impervious surfaces covered 100% with asphalt, some lots now contain "rain gardens," clumps of thirsty vegetation which help slurp up falling rain and absorb it back into the earth. Not only does this help control surface storm water runoff, but it beautifies the parking lots considerably.

Another example of effective storm water management with an aesthetically pleasing result has been the paving of basketball courts with porous materials, which not only absorb rain water, but to some extent, the sound of dribbling basketballs. So after a storm, instead of finding puddles of water, one quickly sees a usable surface.

Certain alleyways have been transformed from ratty roads full of potholes to attractive surfaces with porous pavers. See the following link: http://lancasteronline.com/lancaster/news/lancaster-city-a-national-model-for-green-infrastructure/article_13cbfcf2-a3da-11e3-8f64-0017a43b2370.html

Some rooftops are now crowned, not with shingles or slate, but with vegetation. These "green roofs" ultimately save their owners money.

These are but a few examples of practical, yet aesthetically pleasing, solutions to storm water management challenges. In 1970, when the Clean Water Act was new, municipal leaders throughout the country may not have "promised us a rain garden," but many of them are now moving in that direction. The changes these rain gardens will make will benefit us all.