

RETHINKING YARD CARE

About a century ago, wooden rain barrel was a familiar sight in many backyard gardens. Its purpose was simple – collecting rainfall running off a roof and storing it for future use. Often, that use would have been watering flowers and garden plants when the weather turned dry.

A rain barrel reminds us of a simpler, more sensible, approach to yard care. It suggests an awareness of personal actions and their effects on the environment, with the knowledge that simple and natural methods are sometimes the most effective ways to care for our yard.

Many sources of water pollution originate right in our yards. Fertilizer and pesticides applied to lawns in excessive amounts or before heavy rains can wash into ditches and storm sewers and eventually reach the river. Likewise, leaves and grass clippings contain nutrients such as phosphorus and nitrogen that can be washed away before collection and end up in our waters if we conveniently rake them to the curb. Leaves and grass can also clog storm sewers and contribute to localized flooding.

It is time to rethink.

In the forest environment, a layer of fallen leaves helps reduce erosion by protecting soil from the impact of falling raindrops. Leaves and grassy vegetation are decomposed by soil organisms, which return nutrients to the soil. Decaying vegetation also forms an insulating layer of mulch and adds organic matter which reduces daily temperature fluctuations and increases the soil's capacity to hold moisture.

What works for nature can work for homeowners.

By properly mowing, mulching, and composting leaves and grass clippings, the normal amount of fertilizing, watering, and weeding can often be reduced. If grass clippings are allowed to remain on lawns instead of being raked or bagged, they will produce benefits from natural recycling.

Ultimately, awareness of our personal actions could mean the difference between clean and polluted rivers.

Adapted from University of Wisconsin–Extension in cooperation with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. (1999). *Rethinking Yard Care - A Series of Water Quality Fact Sheets for Residential Areas*. [Brochure]. Author: Korb, G.