



10 Ways to Help Your Watershed

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A clean and well-managed watershed doesn't just mean clean drinking water. Do your part to keep land and water clean and you could reap financial benefits too.

For most of us, the water at home comes from a municipal tap, so it's easy to forget how much the quality of a community's watershed affects water quality and the people, wildlife, and plants that depend on that water. Well-managed watersheds serve as recreational magnets for humans and critical habitat for wildlife, but they also reduce flooding, making your home safer and reducing insurance costs.

What's a watershed?

Here's the funny thing about watersheds: They are more about land than water. A watershed is all the terrain in a given area that drains to a single point—a lake, stream, wetland, or even the ocean.

Your yard is part of a watershed. "Nature doesn't see the world in terms of municipal or site boundaries," says Center for Watershed Protection (CWP) (<http://www.cwp.org/>) Program Manager Greg Hoffman. "Anything you do affects everyone else who lives in your watershed. That includes the people, but also the animals and plants."

Some watershed challenges, such as irresponsible construction practices, are beyond your immediate control. However, many proven solutions lie just inside your front gate.

Community benefits

Healthy, restored, and well-managed waterways offer multiple community-wide benefits, including improved property values, according to research from the Clean Water Partnership (<http://www.pca.state.mn.us/water/cwp.html>) in Minnesota.

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For example, a rainwater management system, which keeps rainwater in a neighborhood by allowing it to sink slowly into the ground, can raise property values when it creates great views.

A Clean Water Partnership study found prices for Minnesota homes with constructed wetland views were nearly a third higher than those without views and sold at prices on par with those fronting a high-quality urban lake.

What you can do to protect the watershed

You have much more control over what happens to the water on your own property. Here are nine ways you can preserve and protect local watersheds:

1. Plant a rain garden. Excess runoff can cause flooding and stream-bank erosion during rainstorms. Creating a rain garden with native grasses, trees, and shrubs gives runoff from your home's downspouts a chance to soak naturally into the ground. Add a rain barrel to save water for later use.

2. Limit fertilizer. If you must fertilize your lawn, choose a product without phosphorous, which along with nitrogen, upsets the balance of nutrients in local waterways.

3. Service your septic system every three years. Failing septics send "plumes" of nitrogen, phosphorous, and bacteria to nearby streams and shores.

4. Avoid pesticides. Though most pesticides break down in soil, a storm can wash them into nearby streams. Instead, explore biological pest control methods such as species-specific bacteria, predator stocking (think ladybugs), and pheromone lures, which attract and trap pests.

5. Pick up pet waste. In a 20-square-mile watershed draining to a small coastal bay, two to three days of droppings from a 100 dogs would contribute enough E.coli bacteria to temporarily close the bay to swimming.

6. Buffer streams. If you have a stream on your property, provide a natural buffer of native trees, shrubs, and plants around its banks to filter dirty storm water runoff.

7. Use commercial car washes. The best place to wash your car is at a commercial car wash, many of which filter their water before directing it to treatment plants. If you must wash your vehicle at home, park it on the grass first, so your lawn absorbs some of the detergent runoff and contaminants.

9. Avoid paving. If you must pave, consider stone pavers for a patio, rather than concrete, and gravel for a driveway, rather than asphalt.

In short, it can be easy and tempting to think of watershed stewardship as someone else's problem. But the responsibility for our most precious resource begins right at home.

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