UNDERSTANDING

Bioretention Areas

WHAT IT IS

Bioretention facilities (also known as rain gardens) are landscaped depressions designed with soils and a variety of plants to receive and treat stormwater through the use of natural processes. These natural processes include the uptake of water by plants and transfer of water to the atmosphere, and infiltration (or soaking up) of water into the soils where microbial action helps to breakdown pollutants and gravity pulls water further down through the soil layers to recharge groundwater. (See Figure 1)

Bioretention facilities can be used in a variety of settings: along a street edge or as an island in a parking lot to capture storm flow from asphalt or concrete surfaces; and near residential or commercial buildings to capture storm flow from roofs. Bioretention facilities are often designed with an underdrain or an overflow that directs flow to the municipal storm drain system.

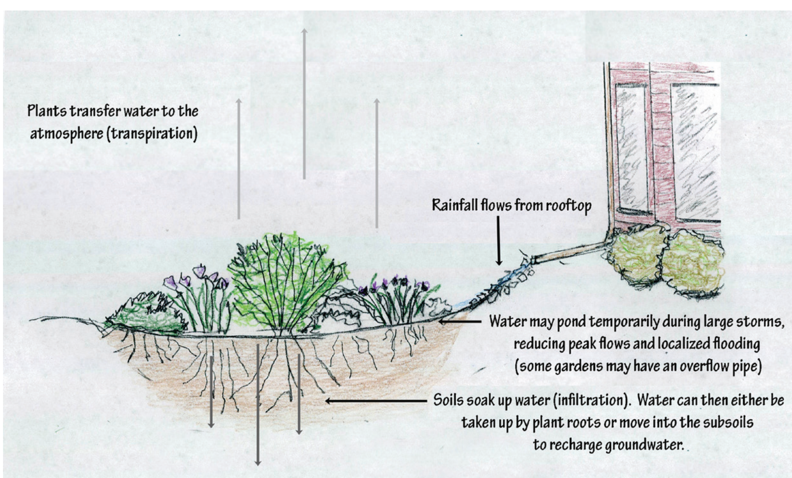


Figure 1: How a Bioretention Facility Functions

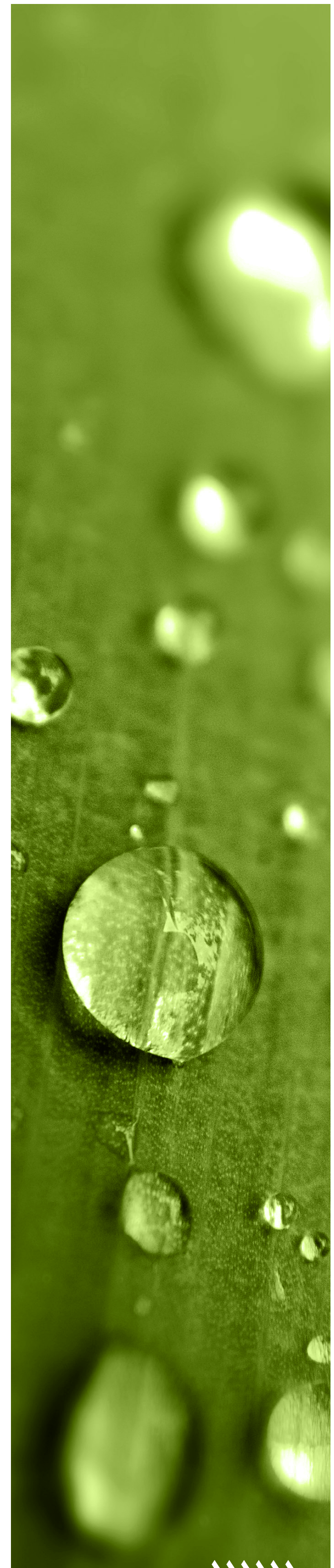
green infrastructure

WATER QUALITY TREATMENT

When a bioretention facility is designed with an underdrain that ultimately delivers flow to surface waters, the capacity of a facility to treat stormwater is critical. Bioretention systems have proven effective at removing many pollutants associated with stormwater: suspended solids, including particulate phosphorous, petroleum hydrocarbons, and heavy metals. The table below shows water quality treatment in the four bioretention facilities tested to date by the University of New Hampshire Stormwater Center.

A rain garden along Route 9 in Hadley, captures storm flow from a drive and parking lot. This photo is taken just after installation and before plants are really established.

Photo courtesy of Berkshire Design Group, Inc.



Pollutant Removal in Four Bioretention Facilities at the University of New Hampshire Stormwater Center

System	Pollutant					
	Total Suspended Solids (TSS)	Total Petroleum Hydrocarbons in the Diesel Range	Dissolved Inorganic Nitrogen (NO3)	Total Zinc	Total Phosphorous	Average Annual Peak Flow
					% Removal	% Reduction
Bio 1-48" depth (42" filter depth)	97	99	44	99	-	75
Bio II-30" depth (24" filter depth)	87	99	NT	73	34	79
Bio III-30" depth (24" filter depth)	91	64	44	75	NT	84
Bio IV-37" depth (24" filter depth)	83	65	42	67	NT	95

NT = no treatment | Source: University of New Hampshire Stormwater Center 2012 Biennial Report

To boost the ability of bioretention facilities to manage for nitrogen and dissolved phosphorous, researchers have been experimenting with optimizing soil mixtures and design. See discussion under "Design considerations." Furthermore, Allen Davis of the University of Maryland has noted that bowl volume, media composition, media depth, underdrainage configuration, and vegetation type, all have roles in effectively helping to address objectives, depending on needs, be they hydrologic (peak flow mitigation, infiltration, annual hydrology, and stream stability) and/or water quality (total suspended solids and particulates, pathogen-indicator species, metals, hydrocarbons, phosphorus, nitrogen, and temperature). Information on how best to design systems according to these needs is evolving.

DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

For the Pioneer Valley, major design objectives for bioretention involve flow reduction and nutrient reduction. Following is some brief guidance on design considerations relative to these objectives. As noted above, bioretention design objectives that aim to address specific target pollutants are emerging. Some of the listings below under "Links to more information" provide some resources that will be useful in this regard.

Flow reduction

Maximum volume reduction comes when bioretention facilities are located in soils that provide for good infiltration and the use of fines in the soil mix are kept to a minimum (the entry of fines into the facility should also be limited through a pretreatment element that allows for settling of particles).

Research is showing that infiltration in soils can be enhanced and preserved over time through the use of dense vegetative cover. The University of New Hampshire Stormwater Center (UNHSC) reports that of the four bioretention facilities it has studied, infiltration rates over time were optimal in the basin (Bio III) where they used a continuous dense vegetative cover. They report, "Previous studies have indicated that plant roots generally experience a 30% die back each year which aids in the development of macropores that keep soil surface infiltration capacity high over time. The data from this study suggests that the dense vegetative cover is more important than plant type for maintaining infiltration rates in vegetative systems."

Nutrients

In designing bioretention facilities for nutrient removal, fill media selection is critical. As it breaks down organic matter typically leaches nitrogen and phosphorous and can exacerbate water quality issues. It is important to have some organic matter to aid plant growth, but limiting its use is critical for successful bioretention facilities.

Nitrogen

Research out of the University of Maryland points to two major considerations for promoting nitrogen removal:

Creation of an anaerobic zone where microbes can use forms of nitrogen (NO2 and NO3) instead of oxygen for respiration – Use of a deeper media layer (3 feet minimum), media with a less permeable bottom soil layer, lower infiltration rates (1 to 2 inches per hour), and design for internal water storage, (a subsurface portion of the media that provides some storage volume) are all important design compoents. In a 2003 study, he found that adding a suitable carbon source, particularly newspaper, to the gravel layer provides a nutrition source for the microbes, enables anaerobic respiration, and can enhance the denitrification process. Davis et al noted that while organic matter should be kept to very modest amounts to avoid leaching of nitrogen as it breaks down, there should be about 5% of total weight or 10% of total volume of organic matter to provide carbon sources. Postconstruction carbon can be supplied from plant roots, leaf litter, and of course the mulch as it breaks down.

More dense planting of vegetation with sizeable root masses (but not so aggressive so as to pose a threat to clogging underdrains) – Deeply rooted grasses, notes Davis et al, are expected to provide good performance. Note that in research at the UNHSC, nitrogen removal was poorest in the bioretention system that had a 60% sand mixture and wooded vegetation as compared to the sister system that had an Eco-Lawn.

Phosphorous

Media selection is the major considerations for promoting phosphorous removal in bioretention facilities. While modest amounts of mulch can be used, Davis et al recommend selecting media with high P-sorption potential, including iron and aluminum rich soils and iron and aluminum based water treatment residuals (a byproduct of drinking water treatment), which could be used as amendments.

Inclusion of vegetation within a bioretention facility also helps to promote phosphorous removal.

RELATED CONSIDERATIONS

General design considerations noted by the U.S. EPA National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) Stormwater Menu of BMP's include:

Drainage Area – Bioretention facilities should usually be used on small sites (five acres or less). When used to treat larger areas, they tend to clog. In addition, it is difficult to convey flow from a large area to a bioretention facility.

Pretreatment – Incorporating pretreatment helps reduce the maintenance burden of bioretention and reduces the likelihood that the soil bed will clog over time. Several mechanisms can be used to provide pretreatment in bioretention facilities. Often, runoff is directed to a grass channel or filter strip to filter out coarse materials before the runoff flows into the filter bed of the bioretention facility. Other features include a pea gravel diaphragm, which acts to spread flow evenly and drop out larger particles.

Slope – Bioretention facilities are best applied to relatively shallow slopes usually at five percent. A sufficient slope is needed at the site to ensure that water that enters the bioretention area can be connected with the storm drain system. These particular stormwater management practices are most often applied to parking lots or residential landscaped areas, which generally have shallow slopes.

Landscaping – Landscaping is critical to the function and aesthetic value of a bioretention facility. Native vegetation is ideal for planting. Another important feature is to select species that can withstand the type of hydrologic system it will experience. At the bottom of the bioretention facility, it is important to have plants that can tolerate both wet and dry conditions. Along the edges, it will remain primarily dry, so upland species will be the most resilient to this type of condition.

MAINTENANCE CONSIDERATIONS

When properly designed, maintenance of these systems is minimal. UNHSC notes, "... the highest maintenance burden occurs during the first two years of operation as the vegetation grows and the system begins to stabilize." Once vegetation is established, maintenance is comparable to what is required for standard landscaping. (UNHSC, 2012 Biennial Report)

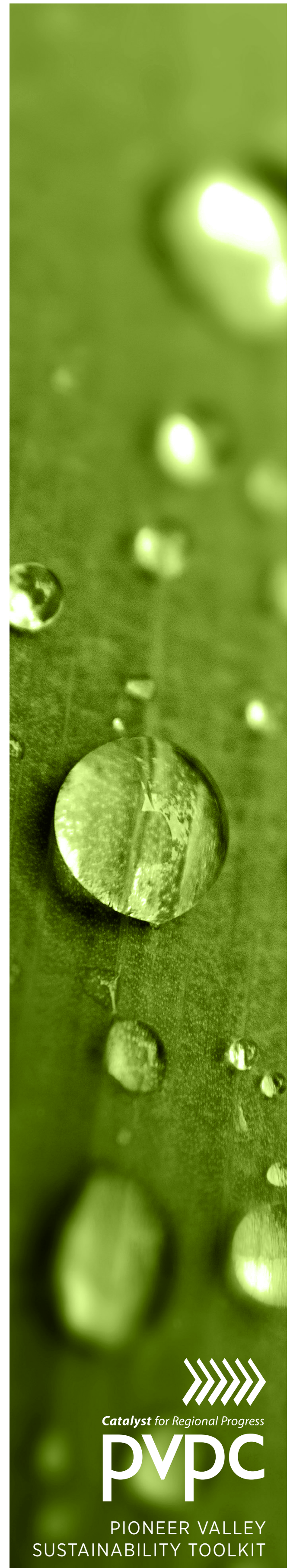
Systems with fine soils may need more cleaning due to obstruction from sediment. Long-term maintenance mainly requires inspection and scraping of surface pollutants.

PERMITTING CONSIDERATIONS

In the Massachusetts Stormwater Handbook, Volume 1 under Stormwater Management Standard #6, stormwater discharges to a Zone I or Zone A are prohibited unless essential to the operation of a public water supply. Discharges within Zone II require the use of a treatment train that provides 80% TSS removal prior to discharge. Bioretention facilities are a good fit for discharges within Zone IIs as they have a TSS removal rate of 90%. In addition, under the Massachusetts Stormwater Handbook, Volume 2, Chapter 2, bioretention facilities are a good option for discharges near cold-water fisheries. However, these should not be developed near bathing beaches and shellfish growing areas.

BARRIERS TO USE

Concern	Experience
Cost	The cost of installing a bioretention facility can vary greatly. A "do it yourself" bioretention facility that captures flow from the roof of a single family home and where soils are well draining can cost as little as a hundred dollars with a simple planting scheme. Engineered systems can cost $4 to $6 per square foot, including the grading, underdrain, stone, and plants. An estimate from the University of New Hampshire Stormwater Center (UNHSC) provides a cost based on per acre of impervious surface draining to the facility that ranges from $14,000 and $25,000 per acre, not including design, permitting, or construction oversight costs. UNHSC further notes that in 2007 they installed a bioretention system in a parking lot median strip as a retrofit. It cost a total of $14,000 per acre, including $8,500 per acre for labor and installation, and $5,500 per acre for materials and plantings. "These finding indicate that for municipalities with equipment and personnel, the retrofit costs are nearly $5,500 per acre of drainage." (University of New Hampshire Stormwater Center 2012 Biennial Report)
Accumulation of toxics	Stormwater flow from roadways and parking lots typically carries a mix of pollutants. Where bioretention facilities are used to receive, capture, and treat these flows, do facilities become toxic? Lisa Stiffler, a researcher with the Sightline Institute, a Seattle based think tank, has been investigating. She has found the following: Petroleum pollutants/PAHs: Studies from the field and laboratory find that rain gardens do a great job of capturing petroleum pollution, and that the chemicals are largely eliminated when they are destroyed by bacteria in the soil. Heavy metals: Soil and mulch in rain gardens contain particles that will adsorb and hold metals including copper, cadmium, lead, and zinc. A small fraction of the metals are sucked into plant roots and vegetation. When Northwest counties test for metals in the sediment that is scooped from the bottom of stormwater ponds or rain gardens that drain parking lots and other city surfaces — material that would likely have higher levels of metals than your average residential rain garden — they found that the contamination levels were still below soil and compost standards meant to protect human health. Bacteria and viruses: While some research has found bacteria and viruses in stormwater that can cause disease in humans, sunlight as well as other microorganisms in the runoff and soil of rain gardens can destroy the pathogens. Also, most of the microorganisms present come from animal waste and are less likely to cause illness in people. The bottom line is that the soil in rain gardens is safe for kids and pets. That said, people are advised to wash their hands after working or playing in any soil, which can contain naturally occurring metals, fecal waste from pets, or any number of compounds one would not want to ingest.



Snow management	If used in conjunction with parking lots or roadways, bioretention facilities should be designed to make for easy movement of plows. Planning a plow path and telling snow plow operators where to push the snow is important in keeping snow out of bioretention areas. According to the Massachusetts Stormwater Handbook (Vol. 2, Ch. 2), never store snow in bioretention facilities. The operation and maintenance plan must specify where on-site snow will be stored. A major reason for this is that infiltrating capabilities will become impaired due to fines that remain once snow melts.

EXAMPLES OF WHERE STRATEGY HAS BEEN IMPLEMENTED

Veterans Affairs Medical Center, Northampton, MA

Three rain gardens at the Northampton Veterans Affairs Medical Center enhance drainage through infiltration of rainfall and snowmelt, and improve aesthetics and habitat values with extensive native plantings. The three rain gardens are part of a campus rain garden master plan.

The rain garden below on the right captures flow from a 1,200 square foot area of roof. The rain garden shown below, includes a "level spreader" built of stone at the top of the system to ensure that storm flow distributes evenly across the basin and does not cause gullies or erosion. This garden below receives flow from a 1,600 square foot area of roof.

Photos courtesy Thomas Benjamin