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Channeling Rain for Environmental Gain

Overcast skies seemed an appropriate backdrop for dedicating rain gardens on campus recently. President Dan Mote and Alfonso Cornish, deputy chief administrative officer for the Prince George's County government, officially dedicated the two rain gardens on Friday, April 11. The ceremony took place on the first day of a national campus greening conference.

Rain gardens, also known as bioretention facilities, are areas of land that reduce the quantity and improve the quality of polluted runoff water from parking lots. The gardens use soil to absorb the water and plants to filter out some of the pollutants.



Media Credit: Carol Salley

The conference was hosted by the university and the National Wildlife Federation. Rep. Steny Hoyer and Prince George's County Executive Jack Johnson planted two trees in the gardens during a second ceremony the following Monday. Mote, Cornish and professors Allen Davis, civil and environmental engineering, and Patrick Kangas, biological resources engineering, each spoke at the Friday event. After the speeches, Mote and Cornish turned the valve of a water tank, allowing water to flow through the gardens as a demonstration.

"It's a great pleasure for the campus to be in a leadership position on a project such as this," Mote said. The university is the first in the country to build rain gardens on its campus.

Building the rain gardens was a collaborative effort between the university and the Prince George's County Department of Environmental Resources, a worldwide authority on rain gardens. The gardens were designed by Neil Weinstein of the Low Impact Development Center, a nonprofit organization dedicated to water and natural resource protection issues. There are plans to build more gardens in the same area, which is adjacent to a parking lot near the Comcast Center. Davis, director of the Maryland Water Resources Research Center, led the university's effort to bring the gardens to campus.

"Our rain gardens have a little more concrete and plastic than usual," he explained during the ceremony. The gardens were built in a way that makes water flow easy to track. They will be used for education and research, in addition to filtering runoff water from the adjacent parking lot.

Kangas, coordinator for the Natural Resources Management Laboratory, and J. Scott Angle, professor of agronomy and associate dean for the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, are also involved in the project. Graduate and undergraduate students will have the opportunity to work with the rain gardens in some of their classes.

Parking lots, among the main causes of runoff on campus, prevent water from soaking into the ground and add pollutants from car brakes and exhaust. Common lot pollutants include oil, solid particles from soil and cars, and metals such as zinc and copper.

Pollution from the parking lots on campus will eventually end up in the Chesapeake Bay. Water runs off into Paint Branch Creek, which leads into the Anacostia River, a major tributary of the Potomac River. The Potomac leads directly to the bay.

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