

# Rain Garden Kit

2026 Owner's Manual



Five native species that bloom from Spring to Fall to provide beauty in your yard and critical habitat for pollinators

Great Swamp Watershed Association Native Plant Program 2026

# Kit Contents

Great for capturing runoff or soggy swales, these plants thrive in wet, sunny areas. Unique purple blooms of blue flag iris and swaths of yellow flowers of golden ragwort start off the season in late spring. Come summer, electric red spikes of cardinal flower and pink blooms swamp milkweed take over. New York ironweed rounds off the season with numerous blooms of thistle-like purple blooms. Spent seedheads of New York ironweed are a favorite of overwintering songbirds. Sun to part sun and moist to wet soils are best for these plants. The kit includes:

- Blue Flag Iris, *Iris versicolor*, 5 plugs
- Cardinal Flower, *Lobelia cardinalis*, 5 plugs
- Golden Ragwort, *Packera aurea*, 5 plugs
- New York Ironweed, *Vernonia noveboracensis*, 5 plugs
- Swamp Milkweed, *Asclepias incarnata*, 5 plugs

**Important: Once you get home, check to see if your plugs need water. Keep their soil moist to the touch (but not soaked) until you are able to plant them in the ground.**

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## Designing your garden: Design Considerations

### *Your Landscaping Style*

These plants can fit any style, including a formal garden, a naturalistic garden (like this design), or a wild garden with clumps. Pollinators will be equally happy with any of these options.

### *Your Garden*

This design can be easily altered to fit a deeper, wider, or curved garden bed. These designs use moderate 10-12-inch center-to-center plant spacings to easily fill a 80 or 50 square foot area. The goal is to eventually have plants pressing shoulder to shoulder for easier maintenance. Tightly spaced plants create a “green mulch” reducing the opportunity for weeds to sprout so that annual mulching is no longer required. You can choose to plant on a tighter spacing. A larger spacing will require more maintenance and mulching to manage weeds, until plants establish.

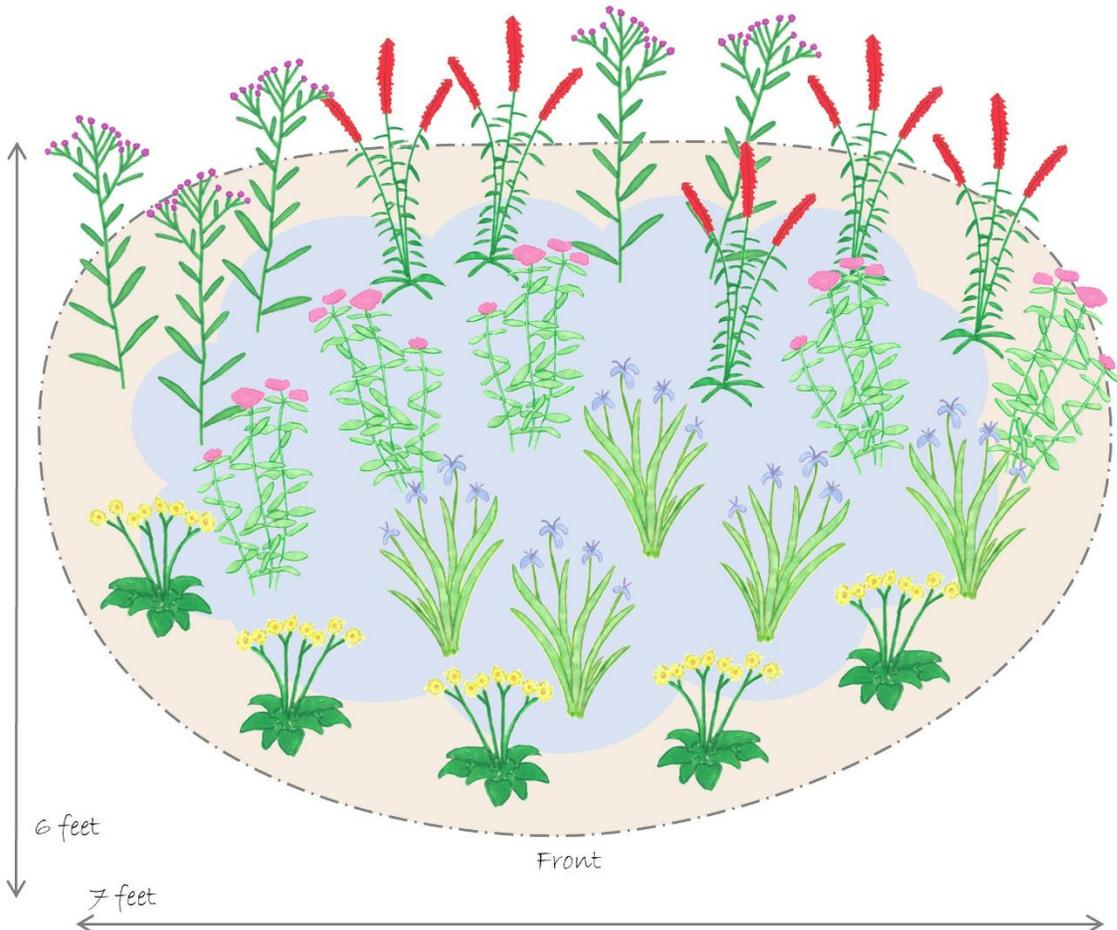
### *Add On!*

These species can be planted alone or can be combined with other sun- and moisture- loving kits or your favorite individual species to make a larger planting.

# Designing your garden: Sample Rain Garden Garden Design

Can be used as is or easily modified to fit your chosen space and your gardening goals. The deer icon indicates high (red) and medium (yellow) deer resistance; however, **deer still may browse on these species.**

<p><b>Blue Flag Iris</b> <i>Iris versicolor</i></p> <p>Color: [Blue square] Light: [Sun icon] Moisture: [Water droplets icon] Shape: [Plant icon] Season: [Deer icon]</p> <p>2-3'</p> <p>May - Jun</p>	<p><b>Cardinal Flower</b> <i>Lobelia cardinalis</i></p> <p>Color: [Red square] Light: [Sun icon] Moisture: [Water droplets icon] Shape: [Plant icon] Season: [Deer icon]</p> <p>2-5'</p> <p>Jul - Sept</p>
<p><b>Golden Ragwort</b> <i>Packera aurea</i></p> <p>Color: [Yellow square] Light: [Sun icon] Moisture: [Water droplets icon] Shape: [Plant icon] Season: [Deer icon]</p> <p>2'</p> <p>Mar - Apr</p>	<p><b>New York Ironweed</b> <i>Vernonia noveboracensis</i></p> <p>Color: [Purple square] Light: [Sun icon] Moisture: [Water droplets icon] Shape: [Plant icon] Season: [Deer icon]</p> <p>3-6'</p> <p>Aug - Nov</p>
<p><b>Swamp Milkweed</b> <i>Asclepias incarnata</i></p> <p>Color: [Pink square] Light: [Sun icon] Moisture: [Water droplets icon] Shape: [Plant icon] Season: [Deer icon]</p> <p>3-4'</p> <p>Jul - Aug</p>	



# Site Preparation

## *Know your sun, moisture, and soil conditions*

The plants in the Rain Garden Kit will do well in sun to part sun conditions.

Moist to wet soil is best for these species. You may need to water your plants during dry summer periods during the first season, after that they should only need watered during drought. Once their roots are established, they will generally not suffer permanent damage even without watering.

These native plants are selected for the clay-silt-loam soils typical for our piedmont or highlands region.

## *Prepare the bed*

If planting in a prepared bed, remove grass and any other unwanted plants that may compete with your new native garden while establishing. Minimize soil disturbance.

### *To prepare a new native plant bed replacing previous plantings:*

Sheet mulching is a great way to start! It is a back-saving “no-dig” strategy that kills unwanted weeds and grass by blocking out sunlight, allowing everything to die and decompose, minimizing soil disturbance and avoiding stirring up the weed seed bank.

- Mow the area you’d like to transform. Use a garden hose or a length of rope to create the garden outline.
- Cover the area with tapeless clean cardboard or 5 to 8 sheets of newspaper (don’t use glossy pages.) Overlap the edges to prevent gaps so that the turf is solidly covered. Wet down as you go.
- Cover cardboard with 3-4” of composted mulch. No soil amendments, no fertilizer. Native plants grow best in simple, nutrient poor soils.
- Poke many small holes through the cardboard to maintain rainwater infiltration.

During spring and summer, this will take at least a month, usually two, to kill enough weeds and turf. Dig spot planting holes straight through to plant plugs.

### *If not planting immediately*

- Keep plugs in a sheltered spot with enough sun and protect from frost/wind.
- Keep them moist but do not over-water.
- Trim plants back to 6-12” and pinch off flowers if they will not be planted for more than a month. With proper care, landscape plugs should stay healthy for many weeks.

## Planting your plugs

- The only tool you need is a garden knife, trowel, or lightweight one hand pick.
- Extract each plug gently from its socket. Squeeze the sides to loosen. Push up from the bottom or use a narrow spatula to ease the plug out. Avoid pulling on the plant's stem!
- Lay out where you want to place each plug. Dig a hole large enough for the plug.
- Plant so the top of the plug is even with the top of the soil. Tamp soil firmly.
- Water the plugs in well.

## Pollinator Garden Management

Native plants are low maintenance, but every garden requires management.

Over-watering can be harmful. Through the first year, water them when the soil surface is dry. The second year and beyond you should only need to water during a drought.

Insects may chomp on plants, but these plants are larval hosts to butterflies and will recover.

Undesirable insects like Japanese beetles or aphids may become a problem. Find a caterpillar-safe way to mitigate the problem (Rutgers agricultural extension hotline 609-989-6853 can help). Even "organic" insecticides can kill desirable insects like Monarch caterpillars or butterflies.

- Healthy pollinator gardens host beneficial insects like ladybugs that eat pests.
- Mechanical removal, eg. spraying, wiping, or picking off large bugs works well.

Deer may also chomp some of these plants. Some species are more deer resistant than others.

- Plants are most palatable when young and don't have deep roots to recover.
- Organic deer repellents successfully repel deer and rabbits but require re-applications
- Cages and fences can be effective physical barriers but check local ordinances.
  - Deer fences should typically be 7-8' tall but for small enclosures 5' is effective.

**Shortening up giants.** If your soil is rich, tall-growing bushy plants may grow taller than wanted and can flop over. Avoid this by cutting back by  $\frac{1}{3}$ -  $\frac{1}{2}$  from Memorial Day to July 4<sup>th</sup> to shorten plant height. This method can be done on the New York ironweed, if desired.

**A slightly messy garden is the best habitat!** Leaving the stalks through the winter provides food and shelter for wildlife as well as visual interest. Cut the stalks in early spring after insects are active. In the fall, leave the autumn leaves to protect overwintering pupae and firefly eggs in your yard. The leaves decompose, enriching the soil, but ensure they are removed in the spring to protect basal rosettes.

**Monitor your garden as it changes.** Remove invasive plants and weeds little and often. If species prove too prolific, divide and share. Diverse yards incorporate multiple layers and support more wildlife.

Experiment and have FUN!

## About each plant

### Blue Flag Iris



Flowers: May - Jun  
Light: Sun to Part Shade  
Moisture: Moist to Wet  
Height: 2-3 ft

A native Iris with bluish-purple blooms with pale lemon centers above sword shaped blue-green leaves reaching 2-3 feet tall. Blooms in May and June, attracting bees and butterflies. Host to the Virginia ctenucha moth. Sun to part shade, moist to wet soil. Can tolerate shallow standing water, making it a great fit for rain gardens. Photo Credit Ginger Van Ryzin.

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### Cardinal Flower



Flowers: July - Sept  
Light: Sun to Part Shade  
Moisture: Moist to Wet  
Height: 2-5 ft

Showy, scarlet-red spikes of flowers, 2-5 feet tall bloom July through September. A late-summer nectar source used especially by hummingbirds, bees, and butterflies. A shorter-lived perennial, but will repopulate if seed meets slightly disturbed soil. Sun to part shade, moist to wet soil. Photo credit Ginger Van Ryzin

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### Golden Ragwort



Flowers: Mar - Apr  
Light: Sun to Part Shade  
Moisture: Average to Wet  
Height: 2 ft

Lush, low green groundcover sends up many thin 2-foot-high stems topped with yellow, daisy-like, 1 inch flowers in March and April. Mass plantings look like a floating sea of yellow. After blooming, remaining basal foliage is an alternate groundcover alternative to non-native pachysandra, vinca, or ivy. Flowers are important to early pollinators and is a host plant for the gem moth and the northern metalmark. A prolific seeder, golden ragwort can spread rapidly. Seed heads can be pruned after flowering to minimize spreading, or can be left for the birds to eat. Sun to part shade, average to wet soil. Photo Credit Ginger Van Ryzin.

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### New York Ironweed



Flowers: Aug - Nov  
Light: Full Sun  
Moisture: Wet  
Height: 3-6 ft

Deep purple with notes of pink, these thistle-like flowers explode from dark purple and green stems reach up to 6 feet tall in early fall. Often found growing in wet or moist meadows, this plant is a great addition to a rain garden or other low-lying portion of a garden. In late fall and winter, seeds of ironweed provide forage for small mammals and songbirds. Grows best in moist to occasionally wet soils and full sun. Photo Credit Public Domain.

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### Swamp Milkweed



Flowers: July - Aug  
Light: Sun to Part Shade  
Moisture: Average to Wet  
Height: 3-4 ft

Fragrant pink blooms in July to August with large, interesting seed pods by fall. Grows up to 4 feet tall and is beloved by bees, wasps, moths, butterflies and more. Larval host to monarch and queen butterflies. Caterpillars may defoliate but the plant will rebound to feed more caterpillars! Sun to part sun, average to wet soil. Photo Credit Ginger Van Ryzin.

# Your native garden throughout the year

Emerge, Bloom and Seed Timeline										
Species Name	Spring		Summer			Fall			Winter	
Blue Flag Iris	[Green]		[Purple]		[Brown]					
Cardinal Flower		[Green]		[Red]			[Brown]			
Golden Ragwort	[Yellow]		[Brown]							[Green]
New York Ironweed		[Green]			[Purple]			[Brown]		
Swamp Milkweed		[Green]			[Pink]		[Brown]			
	<b>Key:</b>		[Green] <b>Emerge</b>			[Brown] <b>Bloom</b>			[Red] <b>Seed</b>	

## Some native pollinators that frequent these plants

Species Name	Some pollinators, larval hosts, and specialist species attracted to these plants
Blue Flag Iris	<p><b>Bees:</b> bumble, digger, green sweat, mason, small carpenter, small sweat, yellow-faced</p> <p><b>Butterflies:</b> bronze copper, eastern tiger swallowtail, long dash, monarch, silver-banded fritillary, skippers (silver-spotted, Peck's, tawny-edged)</p> <p><b>Other:</b> Formicidae ants, long-horned beetle, weevil</p> <p><b>Larval Host Species:</b> <i>Virginia ctenucha</i></p>
Cardinal Flower	<p><b>Bees:</b> bumble, green sweat, small sweat</p> <p><b>Birds:</b> ruby-throated hummingbird</p> <p><b>Butterflies:</b> monarch, swallowtails</p>
Golden Ragwort	<p><b>Bees:</b> cuckoo, green sweat, leafcutter, mason, mining, small carpenter, small sweat, sweat,</p> <p><b>Butterflies:</b> pearl crescent, Zabulon skipper</p> <p><b>Wasps:</b> potter</p> <p><b>Others:</b> false blister beetles, fire-colored beetles, flies (dance, hover, leaf miner, Tachinid, thick-headed), tumbling flower beetles</p> <p><b>Larval Host Species:</b> the gem moth, northern metalmark</p> <p><b>Specialist Species:</b> mining bees (<i>Andrena spp.</i>)</p>
New York Ironweed	<p><b>Bees:</b> bumble, green sweat, leafcutter, long-horned, metallic green</p> <p><b>Butterflies:</b> eastern tiger swallowtail, painted lady, Peck's skipper</p> <p><b>Others:</b> soldier beetles, syrphid flies</p> <p><b>Specialist Species:</b> long-horned bee</p> <p><b>Larval Host Species:</b> Parthenice tiger moth</p>
Swamp Milkweed	<p><b>Bees:</b> bumble, cuckoo, digger, green sweat, large carpenter, leaf-cutter, metallic green sweat, mining, small sweat, small resin, small sweat, yellow-faced,</p> <p><b>Wasps:</b> great black, great golden digger, paper, square-headed, thread-waisted, Tiphiid, Vespidae, yellowjacket</p> <p><b>Others:</b> beetles (long-horned, milkweed leaf, red milkweed, soldier), flies (bee, green bottle, hover, Tachinid)</p> <p><b>Larval Host Species:</b> monarch, milkweed tussock moth</p>

For more information, check out [Pollinators of Native Plants](#) by Heather Holm or visit

[https://www.illinoiswildflowers.info/flower\\_insects/index.htm](https://www.illinoiswildflowers.info/flower_insects/index.htm)

## Put your garden on the Map

Each new native planting adds to the Pollinator Pathway that renews and extends wildlife habitat across our neighborhoods and region, whether it is one container on the patio or a fully native backyard.

If you plant it, the pollinators and birds really will come!

Please take a minute to [Register Your Pollinator Garden](#) on the map to encourage the growing sustainable landscaping community.

To encourage your neighbors, we also recommend attractive explanatory garden signs.

You can purchase a Pollinator Pathway Garden sign through the GSWA plant sale.



*If you have questions about your native plant garden*

Feel free to email us at [plantsale@greatswamp.org](mailto:plantsale@greatswamp.org) We want your pollinator garden to get a good start so it will provide you with years of enjoyment!



**Great Swamp Watershed Association**

The Passaic River **WATERKEEPER**® ALLIANCE Affiliate

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