



Make a Difference

By Shannon Bly
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WATER CONSERVATION IN ACTION

It has been a wet year so far. So much water accumulating so quickly overwhelmed many of the systems we depend on for water management, including our soils, our ditches and our drains. You may have noticed pools of water collecting on your property where there hadn't been a problem before, or overflows to drainage ditches that had always worked in the past.

The flooding this winter was beneficial in showing us where we can improve our water systems. Coming up, too, are the dry months – the best time to do water management projects. What type of project do you need to do, and for what purpose?

Work with the Water

Understanding how water moves on your property and in your watershed can help you determine where to build structures, where to dig ditches, and how to best manage pastures.

Oak Harbor homeowners Jennifer and Bruce Roberts purchased a home on acreage in 2013 with the goal of keeping horses. A drainage ditch runs across their property, dividing the house and driveway from the pastures. They noticed in the winter months the pastures downslope from the drain would fill with water and stay wet well into the spring.

The Roberts dug sediment from the ditch and made sure it was deep enough to hold the water flowing onto their property during rain storms. Additionally, they replaced small culverts adjacent the ditch with larger, more appropriate-sized ones. They actively maintain the ditch by keeping it clear of vegetation and sediment and avoid mowing right up to the ditch edge, in order to reduce erosion. Due to these improvements, Jennifer said the ditch has only overflowed into the pasture twice, and one of those times was this year.

"Follow the water," Jennifer advised. "Know where the water is coming from."

The Roberts used Island County's publicly accessible, interactive online maps, as well as Google Maps, to find the source of the water in their ditch. They determined it

started on top of the hill off Silverlake Road. From the hilltop, water travelled down, through a few ponds, through culverts and across roads, before flowing through their ditch, their neighbors' ditches, under Crescent Harbor Road, and out into Crescent Harbor Bay.

This information helped them understand how their property interacted with their larger watershed.

The Roberts follow water conservation management practices on their property. They now have two horses, an arena, and a shop. The horses have a sacrifice area in winter to keep them from damaging wet fields. Geotextile fabric and gravel under water troughs and in front of stalls reduces mud in heavily used paddock areas, keeping their horses healthy. And they have plans for more water management improvements, including gutters for their horse shelter which will direct water away from the sacrifice areas.

Reduce Stormwater Runoff

Impervious surfaces include any surface unable to absorb and filter water. These include roofs, patios, driveways, sidewalks, and roads, to name a few. We have a lot of impervious surfaces in our developed areas and on our properties, and those areas create stormwater runoff that wasn't present when the area was soil and vegetation. One way to practice good water management and conservation is to reduce the impact your property has on stormwater systems. Coupeville resident Ruth Richards has a goal of keeping "all the water that falls on this lot on this lot." In order to do this, she had to start by looking at her impervious

surfaces and decide what to do with the water running off them.

Her roof water is directed into two 500-gallon tanks, which she uses to water her large backyard garden - a catchment system that's very useful.

"I can water through the beginning of August," said Ruth. For her roof water catchment project, she contacted the Whidbey Island Conservation District, which helped her determine her roof's rainwater capacity and how many tanks she would need.

Last year, inspired by the website depave.org, she hired a landscaper to remove 400 square feet of driveway from her lot, and replaced it with soil - a "de-pave" project. She planted fruit trees and native shrubs in place of the pavement. Her front yard is noisy with a chorus of song birds, and we saw a native bumblebee, weighed down with pollen, pollinating a peiris japonica bush in bloom.

By removing impervious surfaces and replacing them with vegetation, not only is her property apt to absorb and filter stormwater, it creates wildlife habitat, both of great benefit to Ruth and her community.

Redirect Roof Water

One issue that can commonly bubble up for homeowners is rainwater accumulating around the foundation of a building. Years ago, staff at Greenbank Farm noticed this drainage issue surfacing around some of the outbuildings on the property. They contacted staff from WSU Extension Island County and the Whidbey Island Conservation District for consult. After receiving recommendations, Greenbank Farm staff decided it was appropriate to redirect the roof water of their outbuildings to a rain garden.

Rain gardens are landscaped areas that collect, absorb, and filter stormwater runoff from rooftops, driveways, patios, and other impervious surfaces that don't allow water to soak in. The location of a rain garden is carefully selected based on existing soil conditions and infrastructure such as wells, septic, and buildings. Ideal areas for rain gardens are in places that have a good capacity for drainage, not wet areas that naturally collect water.

For the Greenbank Farm, this location was

next to the small playground on the west side of the property. In 2012, WSU Extension Master Gardeners installed the rain garden with assistance from the nonprofit organization 12,000 Rain Gardens.

By 2019, the rain garden needed rehabilitation. One Dwarf Blue Arctic Willow had grown so large it had outcompeted all the other rain garden plants, and the original sign explaining the purpose of the rain garden had faded away. In November, volunteers with WSU Extension Master Gardeners, Island County Marine Resources Committee, the Port of Coupeville, and members of the Whidbey community weeded and mulched the rain garden before planting new native plants. Over the winter, the newly restored rain garden has once again been busy collecting and filtering stormwater that would otherwise have been collecting around building foundations.

Seek Guidance When Planning a Project

Jennifer Roberts says she and her husband have a joke about their home improvement projects.

"If we'd known then what we know now," she said, "we probably would have done it differently."

Get your information and planning done ahead of time. Seek the guidance of a professional when planning most projects. Engineers and natural resource planners will be able to give you advice and resources that can make your plan a success. You can start with the free resources, advice, and referrals at Whidbey Island Conservation District, where staff can help you get started with your project.

Check with local town, city, and county, as well as state regulatory authorities, before you start a drainage project. Map out infrastructure, such as your septic system, location of water hook ups, and location of utilities, and always call before you dig! Bluffs, shorelines, steep slopes, and wetlands are particularly sensitive landscapes with possible additional rules to follow, so if your property has one of these features - as many of us do on Whidbey - find out by first contacting Island County Planning Department, and then consult a geotechnical engineer or environmental consultant to start your drainage project plan.

The best time to work on water management projects is May - October, when soils have dried out. Driving equipment on waterlogged soil can compact and damage it, potentially making drainage problems worse. Winter and spring are great times to observe your yard and plan your project. Most of us were able to observe water movement on our properties this winter! Now is the time to make a plan for your water management project.

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