

Steps homeowners can take to keep our water clean.

By: Corine Burgess

Did you know that the number one cause of degradation to all water is runoff from urban areas? In fact, a typical city block generates five times more runoff than a forested area of the same size. These are interesting facts. Most people tend to believe that the majority of water pollution is caused by other means such as littering, industry and agriculture. The rain that flows away from your home and property carries particles of oil, grease, trash, pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers with it. All storm water flows into a water body, such as your local lake, and eventually ends up in the ocean. Fortunately, you, as a homeowner can do much to improve the quality of water that flows from your yard.

Paved surfaces such as driveways, roads, sidewalks and parking lots prevent rain and other water from percolating into the ground. Instead the water finds its way to the local storm drain and eventually ends up in our lakes or some other body of water. As the water travels, it heats up from the sun. As the heated fluid runs its course it picks up all sorts of trash, particles of chemicals and what ever else is on the ground in its path. You can imagine how this affects the water body that this nasty liquid winds up in!

There is a simple solution to this problem. Instead of pouring concrete for that driveway, why not use some sort of porous surface such as gravel? You can also purchase porous paving asphalt or use small paving blocks instead of one large, solid surface. Walkways and sidewalks within your yard can be constructed of wood, gravel, brick, stones, mulch or even grass. By using these types of materials, the rain water will have a chance to percolate into the ground and be filtered before it reaches any body of water.

Another simpler way to help out is simply by installing a rain barrel. You can make one yourself or purchase one. Rain barrels collect and store the rainwater that runs off of your roof. The gutters of your home will drain into the barrel when it rains. A spigot located near the bottom of the device allows the recycled water to be used for lawns, gardens or even to wash your car. If you decide to install a rain barrel, don't use the water on plants that you plan to eat such as vegetables or fruits. Remember, the water is coming from your roof which may have all sorts of bacteria, bird feces and other organisms that may cause harm if consumed.

Another great way to clean up runoff while beautifying your yard is by installing a rain garden. These special gardens function like a sponge. They absorb and filter the runoff from your roof, driveway and yard. Utilizing plants that grow in wet and dry conditions, these gardens should be planted at least 10 feet from the house. They are generally from 3 – 12 inches deep and should have a flat bottom. The garden size should be about 1/3 of the area draining into it. If installed properly, a 700 square foot rain garden can infiltrate 25,000 gallons of water a year. That's a lot of clean water!

Other steps you can take to keep our water clean are:

- Maintain your septic system. Malfunctioning or overflowing systems can release bacteria and nutrients into the water cycle.

- Reduce your water usage. By conserving water, you as a homeowner can significantly reduce the amount of wastewater going into the sewage plant or septic tank.
- Use chemicals carefully. If possible, use nontoxic chemicals for cleaning and reduce the amount that you do use. Make sure to store containers so they don't lead and leach into the ground. Use phosphate free detergents if possible. Phosphates add to the nutrient levels in water bodies and can promote algae blooms and other non-desirable occurrences.
- Landscape your yard with native or Florida Friendly plants. By using this type of vegetation, you reduce the amount of water, fertilizer, herbicide and pesticides needed for other types of plants.
- Take care of your vehicle. By keeping your automobile in good working condition, less oil and other types of liquids will seep out of your engine. Wash your car on the lawn where the dirty water can soak into the ground and filter. When changing your oil or antifreeze, make sure to dispose of it properly; never put it in a storm drain, on the ground or in a ditch. Take it to a recycling center. Did you know that just 1 quart of oil can contaminate over 1 million gallons of drinking water?

It is amazing how practicing these good habits can help the environment. Being a good steward of our precious water and other natural resources is a win-win. All of us have a shared responsibility to protect our natural world: to use only what we need, make smarter choices, and pass on to future generations the beauty, wildlife, water and natural resources we have today. Investing in conservation is a critical way of meeting that responsibility.