

Sharing our story: A rain garden planter at Trinity Church, Southover, Lewes



In 2000, the Sussex town of Lewes suffered serious flooding. With climate change this once-in-40-year event has the potential to become a more regular occurrence. Transition Town Lewes started a 'Rain Gardens for Lewes' project with which Trinity Church became involved.

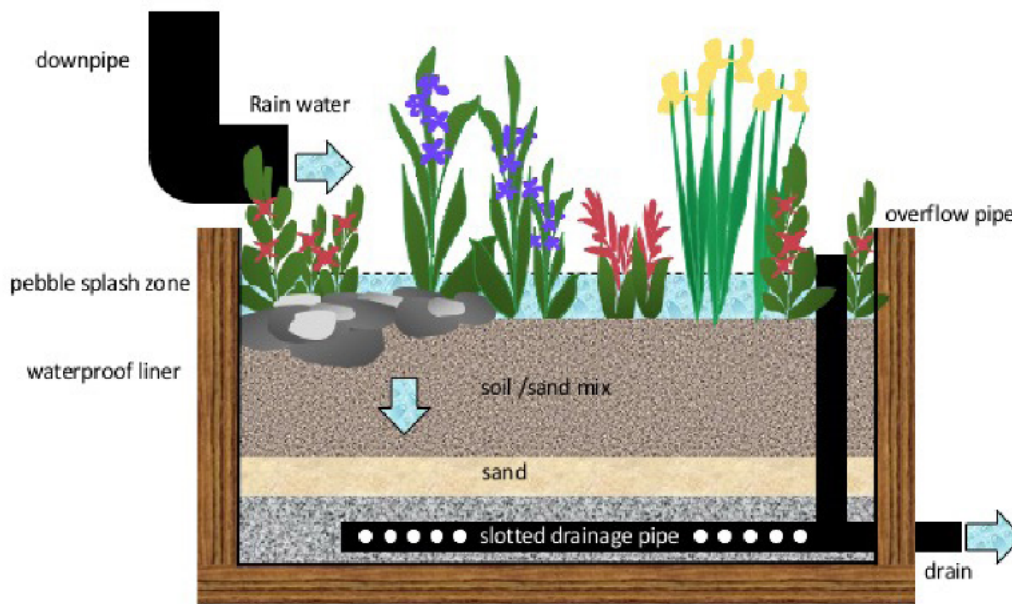
Floods caused by river and tide are perhaps best dealt with by local and national government, and work carried out since the 2000 event now protects most of the town. Flash flooding, on the other hand, is a rather more local phenomenon, in an urban environment it is usually caused by run-off from roofs and tarmac – and its risk may be minimised by local action.

To illustrate this point, Transition Town Lewes and the Trinity Creation Care team have installed a rain garden planter at the church. This kind of planter slows down the flow of water from roof to sewer, giving the latter time to cope with a sudden downpour. As a bonus, the plant roots, compost and gravel filter out a certain amount of pollution.



HOW IT WORKS

Rain garden planters are specially designed to receive and filter rainwater from a diverted downpipe. Inside, a waterproof liner contains layers of soil and sand for filtration. Buried in the base, within a layer of gravel, a slotted pipe returns the filtered water to the drain or ground. Rain garden planters can rapidly absorb water run-off, reducing the risk of sewer systems being overloaded and, in turn, the potential for surface, or flash, flooding.



RAIN GARDENS ALSO HELP TO:

- Filter pollutants, such as nitrates, out of the water before it returns into ground-water systems (vital for Lewes, which relies on underground aquifers for its drinking water).
- Create natural habitats in urban areas, attracting bees, butterflies, and birds.
- Raise public awareness of the importance of natural landscaping to manage flood risk.

This is, of course, a serious and pragmatic sort of scheme. On the other hand, there is no real reason why you should not have fun with it. You would need plants that can cope with alternate drought and flood, but, chosen with care, these can be wonderfully decorative. The planter can be as basic as you like but, on the other hand, it could be designed to amuse the children, impress the neighbours, or form an essential part of a water garden – which, given that the other problem we face with water is the likelihood of failing aquifers, might not be a bad idea. And incidentally, one of the easiest ways of making your church land more biodiverse is by adding some kind of water feature.

THE PLANTS

Their plants have been carefully chosen to withstand periods of flooding but can also resist drier periods as well. These are the plants they used, most are ornamental cultivars of native species:

- Bugle (*Ajuga reptans* 'Black Scallop')
- Water mint (*Mentha aquatica*)
- Sedge (*Carex* 'Fishers Form')
- Periwinkle (*Vinca minor* 'Illumination')
- Male fern (*Dryopteris filix-mas* 'Cristata')
- Golden Creeping Jenny (*Lysmachia nummularia* 'Aurea')
- Snake's-head fritillary (*Fritillaria meleagris*)

The church's rain garden planter has been very successful in holding back water during heavy periods of rain. Transition Town Lewes is hoping that other organisations will take up the idea.