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Features

Rain barrels, composting touted during sustainable living seminar

[Print Page](#)

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SAWYER — Composting, rain barrels and rain gardens were three eco-friendly initiatives explored during a Sustainable Living Seminar presented by Chikaming Open Lands on Saturday, July 12.

Sharing their first-hand experiences and lots of hand-outs were Kris Martin, associate planner of Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, and Nancy Carpenter, manager of the Berrien Conservation District.

Martin listed some of the reasons why he is "passionate" about composting, including high quality soil, reduction of waste going to the landfill, lower water and sewage bills, lesser materials going into septic systems and nutrients for microorganisms and worms.

Backyard composting can take various shapes, from heaps and chicken wire bins to tumbling barrels and even indoor containers for worm (or vermin) composting. Both speakers, however, admitted that worm composting is more popular with children than adults.

Martin said worm composts are easy to make. He recommended starting with "several hundred" redworms, also known as wigglers, which are available from many on-line sites, including Kalamazoo's Flowerfield Enterprises at wormwoman.com.

While the worm variety is best kept indoors or the garage, Martin recommended locating other compost piles away from the house in partial sun and on soil with good drainage.

A compost basket made from a plastic five-gallon ice cream container is handy for collecting kitchen waste, such as coffee grounds, egg shells and vegetable cuttings. More sophisticated versions, with charcoal filters and designer colors, are available for purchase.

Grass clippings, leaves, napkins and shredded paper are other good compost ingredients. Materials to avoid are: dog or cat feces, which can cause blindness; meat and dairy products because they may attract pests and develop odors; and invasive or diseased plants such as garlic mustard, which Martin recommended placing in a plastic bag and putting in the garbage.

Worms, by the way, don't care for citrus food waste, Martin said.

Maintaining a compost pile includes regular watering for moisture and turning often with a pitchfork



Proud owners Lisa and Lee Bloom get ready to take their new tumbling composter to their New Buffalo home following the recent sustainable living seminar hosted by Chikaming Open Lands. - photos by Janet Hayes

or shovel, or rotating the pre-made containers such as the one purchased by New Buffalo residents Lisa and Lee Bloom following the seminar. Carpenter, who sells the barrels for \$125 with a five-year guarantee, said they are critter-proof and help control odor.

Carpenter also has rain barrels ready to sell, but said they are easy to make with materials and tools found in any hardware store once a suitable, food-safe barrel is found. Screening, gutter down spout and elbow, spigot, overflow valve and blocks for an elevated base are the most critical.

Carpenter said decorating the barrels is left to one's imagination, but advised against white or light colors to avoid algae and bacterial growth. The fully assembled barrels she sells are either black or blue for \$75 or terra cotta and grey for \$80.

While water collected in barrels should not be used for drinking, cooking or bathing, rain barrels are: handy for watering plants during dry spells; help save on well pump electricity costs and city water bills; provide an additional outdoor faucet; prevent erosion from gutter downspouts, and can be used for washing windows and cars and, during power outages, flushing toilets.

For safety reasons, Carpenter said a tight fitting lid is needed for safety and suggested storing empty rain barrels in the garage during the winter, although leaving the spigot open might be sufficient.

Carpenter said filling the rain barrel should not be a problem, particularly after the area's recent "huge rain events." Run-off from an average-sized house can equal 600 gallons of water from a one-inch rainfall.

With so many impervious surfaces found in residential areas today, Carpenter said using a rain barrel enables "capturing some of that rain water and releasing it slowly at a more natural rate in our garden."

Another use for rain water was illustrated by Martin using rain gardens he worked on at New Buffalo's Oselka Park, Three Oaks Community Garden and New Troy Community Center as examples.

He said rain gardens are safer and much more attractive than simple retention ponds and have the added benefit of attracting birds and natural pollinators, such as bees.

"Rain gardens keep streams, rivers and lakes healthy by filtering the run-off and they also help reduce flooding," Martin said. "But you have to educate the lawn cutters that they aren't weeds."

A backyard rain garden can be created by filling a shallow depression with about 60 percent sand, 30 percent topsoil and 10 percent compost, topped with shredded hardwood mulch.

Martin said once established, rain gardens can be self-managing, in part because of the long root stems of native plants that are used in them. Among those he recommended planting were blue flag iris, purple coneflower and prairie dropseed.

Carpenter also distributed sample kits for well water analysis and said free screening of drinking water wells for nitrate and nitrite was available from the Berrien Conservation District by calling (269) 471-9111.

Next up for Chikaming Open lands is a dedication ceremony for The Woods Preserve Extension Project at 11 a.m. Saturday, July 26. The Sawyer-based land conservancy recently acquired an additional 3-plus acres of land to expand the preserve located along Harbert Road west of Red Arrow Highway and just west of Timber Lane — a purchase entirely funded by donations from friends and neighbors of the property.

A brief program highlighting the history of the project and the natural features and environmental significance of the property will be followed by tours led by Land Protection Specialist Ryan Postema. For more information or to RSVP, call (269) 405-1006 or send an email to col@chikamingopenlands.org.

