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CONSERVATION CHRONICLE

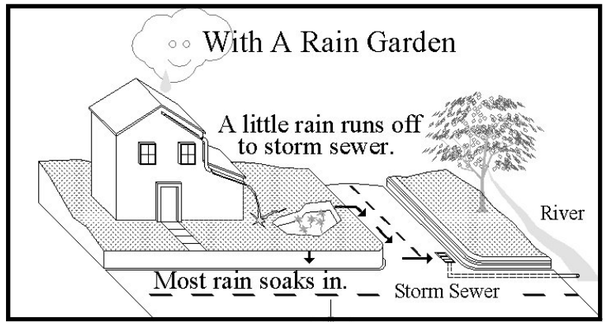
Newsletter of the Land Conservation Department

To promote the awareness of Sauk County's natural resources and to provide technical assistance for their productive use, enhancement, and preservation.

Volume 16 | Number 2 | August 2005

Rain, Rain, Don't Go Away

With the advent of modern wells, most of us do not think twice about getting abundant, clean water; but we cannot take it for granted. We need to make sure there is plenty of safe water into the future. How? One way is to build rain gardens. They are shallow basins, planted to flowers and grasses, designed to catch rainwater that currently runs into the street or stream and flows away. These gardens allow the water to soak back into the ground and refill the aquifers to keep our wells flowing.



You might think that your lawn serves this function right now. It might to some degree, but because the grass has shallow roots, most rain water flows right across it. One study shows only 10 percent actually soaks into your lawn in an average rainstorm. The other 90 percent flows to the street or stream. This runoff can add up, resulting in flooding problems downstream.

Not only are you sending all that water away, but it takes a lot of nutrients and pollutants along with it. Fertilizer, grass clippings, oil and gas from the street all wash into the stream or river and add to our water quality problems. Rain gardens use these nutrients and filter out the pollutants to keep water safe to use.

Native plants do the best job in rain gardens since they have deep root systems that facilitate infiltration. Because of these roots, they are able to tolerate both very dry spells and periods of plentiful rain. By using native plants, the garden can provide continuous flowers. Using landscape fabric and mulch will keep the weeds down and the garden manicured. Keep in mind that these gardens are not ponds - they should not hold water more than a few hours for most rainstorms, two days at the longest. This design ensures that they do not breed mosquitoes. Mosquitoes need 7-12 days of standing water to completely develop.

Want to see one in action? The Land Conservation Department cooperated with the UW-Extension and other partners to build two rain gardens in downtown Baraboo. The sites are located along the 200 block of 4th Street at the Baraboo Public Library and the First United Methodist Church.

These sites help us promote construction of residential and commercial rain gardens as a tool to reduce the volume of stormwater entering rivers and streams. The rain gutters had been directly plumbed into the city's stormwater drains which flowed into the Baraboo River. Now some of the gutters are directed to the rain garden and all that water infiltrates into the groundwater.

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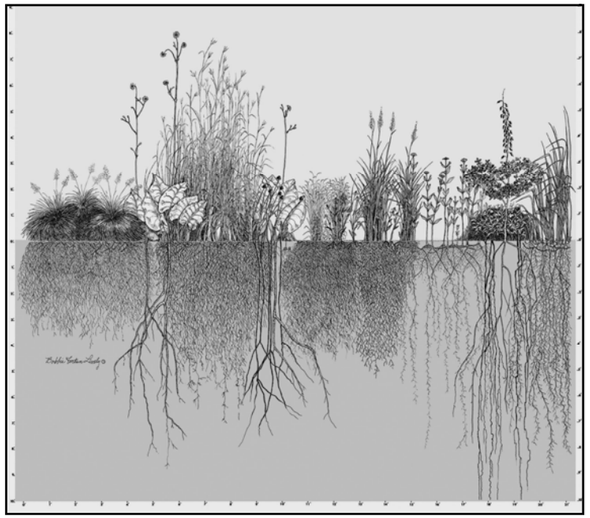
So whether you live in town or a rural area, think about where your water is going. Are you sending it downstream to New Orleans loaded with nutrients and pollutants? Why not keep it here for the next generation to use?

For more information contact UWEX at 355-3250 or go on-line http://clean-water.uwex.edu/pubs/raingarden/

Power of the Prairie: Roots!



Many of our conservation practices offer the option of using cool season grasses like brome and timothy or native grasses and flowers like big bluestem and black eyed susan. For our buffer strips in particular, we encourage you to use native species. The rain gardens in this Chronicle issue do their job best with native plants. Why? Native plants are typically deep-rooted, long-lived, and promote infiltration of rainwater; therefore, they do a better job at holding soil and filtering pollutants than the shallow-rooted, short-lived cool season grasses.

How do they do it? Did you know that approximately 70 percent of the average prairie plant is roots? The leaves, stems, and flowers account for only about a third of the total living matter. Why? Because plants have to survive in an environment that is among the most extreme in the world: The American Midwest.

With summer's heat and drought, temperatures at the soil surface can exceed 110° F. It may not rain much for months. In winter the temperature on the Wisconsin prairie can dip well below 0° F. These plants must have hefty underground "bank accounts" to weather the bad times that would put lesser plants out of business for good.

During the summer droughts, the deep-rooted prairie plants draw moisture and nutrients from deep in the soil. Some prairie plants are known to have roots that exceed 20 feet deep! This allows them to continue to grow even under extremely dry conditions.

Prairies evolved with bison, antelope, deer, as well as many smaller animals that eat vegetation. They are able to tolerate this grazing and browsing because they store water and food underground and can regenerate from their established root systems.

The roots of prairie plants actually help to build the soil. One third of the roots of average prairie grasses die at the end of the growing season. These dead roots decay into organic matter in the soil, becoming natural compost. This adds to the fertility and water-holding capacity of the soil and helps to heal depleted farmland. The dense prairie roots are like a giant sponge, greatly increasing infiltration of rainwater into the groundwater aquifer. This reduces runoff and flooding and recharges our groundwater resources.

Think about the benefits of native plants when you are choosing a buffer seeding, planting a rain garden, or just landscaping your yard. They are great for conservation and pretty, too!

Adapted from Prairie Nursery, Inc. at www.prairienursery.com

Where Is This?

If you recognize where this is located, send us your answer along with your name, address, and phone number by October 14 to the following address: Sauk County LCD, 505 Broadway, Baraboo, WI 53913. One winner will be drawn from the correct answers and will receive a Farm & Fleet gift certificate.

Congratulations to John Kinsman for correctly identifying the Cedar Grove Cheese Factory near Plain in the April/May Conservation Chronicle. He received a Farm & Fleet gift certificate.

Cedar Grove Cheese is a small, family owned cheese factory that has operated for over 100 years. While the Cedar Grove Cheese Factory preserves the old-world tradition and standards in their cheesemaking operation, they are also at the forefront of labeling and specialty product innovation. They have employed an innovative wash-water treatment facility that simulates the natural cleansing action of wetlands to purify the water before discharging to Honey Creek.

Cedar Grove Cheese Factory located near Plain

Did you know that…

- Wisconsin is the nation's leading cheese producer.
- Wisconsin and California account for nearly 50 percent of all cheese production.
- There are about 300 varieties of cheese sold in the United States.
- American type cheese—particularly cheddar—have long been the largest category in U.S. cheese sales, but other cheeses have steadily been gaining ground.
- Cheddar and mozzarella are the two most popular cheese varieties.
- The making of cheese dates back more than 4,000 years.
- Until the 19th century, cheesemaking remained a local farm industry.
- The first cheese factory in the U.S. was in the state of New York in 1851.
- More than one-third of all milk produced in the U.S. is used to manufacture cheese.

Source: Dairy Facts 2004 Edition

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blocking sunlight from reaching the forest floor. Garlic mustard is another highly aggressive plant that shades out tree seedlings and other native vegetation by greening out earlier than our native plants.

The solution to the storm - natives and knowledge. It won't be a quick fix, but it's a start! Many plants chosen for landscaping are picked for their aesthetic appeal but most are exotics and have the tendency to become aggressive and escape. So go native and get to know your backyard. Once you know the plants in your area you may be able to help slow the spread of this invasives storm.

There are limited cost-sharing opportunities available for eradicating invasives. For more information on cost sharing and on invasive species, please contact the Sauk County Land Conservation Department at 355-3245.

Clean Sweep is Almost Here!

Many products you use in your home or yard contain hazardous materials. Improper disposal of these products can cause fires, injuries to people and animals, and groundwater contamination. On September 23 and 24 you can bring your household hazardous wastes to the Sauk County Landfill for proper disposal. For more information please call the Landfill at 524-6515.

Most household products are not hazardous. They may become hazardous if you use them improperly, store them improperly, or dispose of unused products improperly.

Do's

- Follow directions carefully on the product label.
- Watch out for words such as CAUTION, WARNING, or DANGER. Keep all of these products away from children!
- Look for a non-hazardous or less hazardous product.
- Return used motor oil to a waste oil collection site.
- Keep leftover products in original containers.

Don'ts

- Do not dump leftover products in the backyard or down the storm sewer.
- Do not burn leftover products.
- Do not bury leftover products.
- Do not reuse pesticide or other chemical containers for other purposes.
- Do not mix chemical wastes.

Latex paint is not a hazardous waste, but it is a liquid waste that must be dried out and then properly disposed.

Small quantities can be dried out by removing the lid and stirring occasionally.

For larger amounts absorbing agents such as kitty litter, vermiculite, or ground corn cobs can be added.

You can then throw the dried paint, cans, and other materials in your normal trash.

MARK YOUR CALENDARS!

When:	Friday, September 23	3:00 p.m. - 6:00 p.m.
	Saturday, September 24	8:00 a.m. - noon
Where:	Sauk County Landfill E8795B Evergreen Lane Baraboo, WI 53913	
Acceptable:	* Pesticides, herbicides, insecticides, rodenticides and other yard and garden chemicals	
	* Home products including latex, lead and oil-based paints, varnishes, stains, solvents, cleaning products	
	* Wood preservatives, animal health products, pool chemicals	
Unacceptable:	* Infectious or medical waste * Explosives * Compressed gas cylinders * Unknown bulk drums (>5 gallons)	

CREP Buffer Program Expands

The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) offers owners a great incentive for helping protect environmentally sensitive lands next to rivers, streams, ditches, lakes, ponds, and wetlands. Landowners enroll agricultural lands and plant grass, shrub or tree filter strips, restore wetlands, or install grassed waterways to improve water quality. The program has been offered in other parts of the county for several years, and now the townships of Fairfield, Greenfield, and Merrimac are being added to the project area.

"The state asked if the county had additional areas needing protection. Our Land Conservation Committee had requested these towns be included from the beginning, and now they're in," says Joe Van Berkel, County Conservationist. He adds, "These buffers catch soil and nutrient runoff. Buffering water resources in that area will help improve water quality in the Baraboo and Wisconsin rivers."

Landowners have the choice to enroll eligible lands in either a 15-year contract or a perpetual conservation easement. Landowners receive payments annually for up to 15 years based on the lands' soil types. These annual payments range from $60 to $142 per acre. In addition, landowners are paid an up-front, one-time incentive payment ranging from $210 to $1,400 per acre. The cost of planting the buffer is reimbursed up to 110 percent.

"The Farm Service Agency's state office hasn't given us the green light to start enrolling people, but I'm happy to provide general information anytime," says Brenda Hendricks, Farm Service Agency CRP administrator. "If you're really interested, you can meet with the Land Conservation staff to see how this program would enhance your farm operation."

For more information contact: Brenda Hendricks, Farm Service Agency, 355-4420, or Jen Stewart, Sauk County Land Conservation, 355-3245, jstewart@co.sauk.wi.us

Caught in an Invasives Storm

Like an unforgiving tornado, invasive plants sweep through our woodlands, prairies, and wetlands damaging our native habitats. What if these invasive storms grew closer to home, possibly right in your own backyard? Since many of Wisconsin's current invasive species started out as landscape plants, the chance of this is higher than you may think. Who would have guessed that we would be releasing such destructive beauties?

Currently Wisconsin has five exotic plants species listed under state law as noxious or nuisance species. Noxious weed species on the list as prohibited and to be destroyed are Canada thistle, field bindweed, and leafy spurge. Plants defined as nuisance species are purple loosestrife and multiflora rose. Under state law these species may not be sold, distributed, planted, or cultivated. Despite the laws surrounding these species, they are scattered throughout the state and risk being transported.

Now there is a new set of storms blowing into our community that just have not made the list yet. The worst part is that some of these invasive species are still being sold for landscaping purposes! Common buckthorn and glossy buckthorn are examples of common hedgerow species that can still be purchased today. Since its introduction, buckthorn has escaped into our woodlands and is demolishing our native plants. Buckthorn is able to outcompete native plants by greening up earlier and staying green later in the season. There are areas in woodlands where buckthorn has become so successful that it completely wipes out all native understory leaving an overbearing jungle of brush

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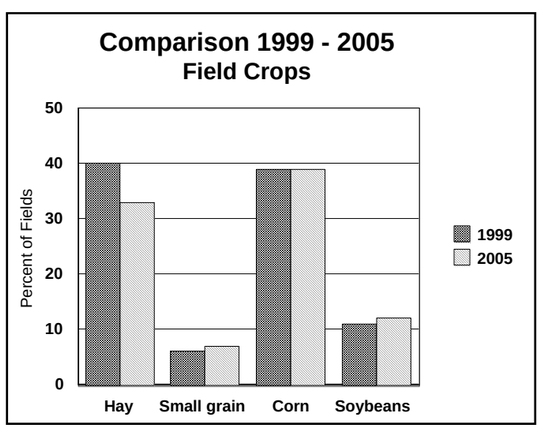
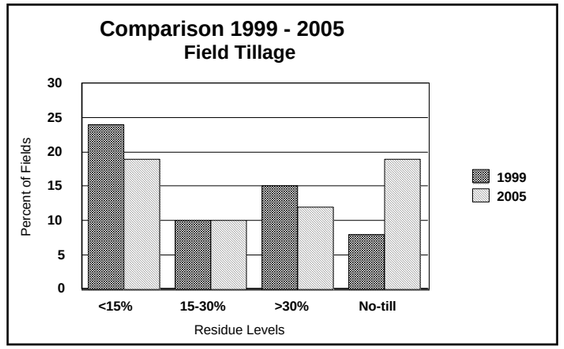
Seventh Annual Soil Erosion Survey

The Sauk County Land Conservation Department recently completed our annual survey of soil erosion in Sauk County. This is the seventh year of the survey, and each year the additional data that we gather helps us better estimate current soil erosion levels and long-term trends.

The survey is conducted on cropland fields throughout the county. Sample points in 685 fields were originally selected, and each year we return to these locations. Recorded data on each field includes soil type, slope steepness and length, previous crop, current crop, residue level, tillage method, conservation practices, and any evidence of erosion. The survey provides a statistically accurate estimate of soil erosion as well as cropping and tillage trends.

What are the current soil erosion levels in Sauk County? This year's survey indicated that the average annual soil loss has remained relatively constant for the past seven years. Erosion levels this year averaged 3.2 tons per acre per year. The average annual allowable soil loss for most Sauk County soils is between three and five tons per acre per year. The data indicates most Sauk County farmers are practicing good conservation keeping the average soil erosion levels low. However, the "average" figure might give a false impression that soil erosion is all under control. That is not the case! While most farmers are doing a great job of conservation, there are other farms where soil erosion is excessive.





Crop selection and rotation are important factors in controlling soil erosion and sediment runoff. A field in alfalfa is much less prone to soil erosion than a field of corn or soybeans. The survey indicated that alfalfa acreage is lower again this year while corn and soybean acreage remained relatively constant. Twelve percent of the surveyed fields were planted to soybeans, 39 percent to corn ,and 33 percent to alfalfa.

Since alfalfa has a very positive effect on controlling soil erosion, this reduced acreage could have resulted in higher average soil loss. However, more and more farmers are using high residue levels and/or contour buffer strips to control erosion. High residue levels protect the soil from eroding and washing away - the higher the residue levels, the greater the soil protection. The survey indicates that 74 percent of the corn and 78 percent of the soybeans had field residue levels greater than 15 percent after planting. No-till planting was used on 33 percent of the corn and 44 percent of the soybeans.

While the use of conservation tillage practices and the overall erosion levels for the county are encouraging, there remains some disturbing results from the survey. We still have 23 percent of the fields with soil losses greater than tolerable levels. More disturbing is the fact that 11 percent of our fields are eroding at significant levels - 10, 15, or 20 tons per acre per year. These soils are being depleted, and our rivers and streams are being

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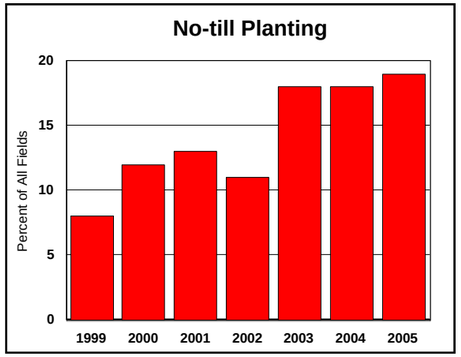
polluted by the sediment. The new state runoff rules have been designed to address these problems, so farmers in this group will be expected to reduce their erosion levels in the future.

Overall, the conservation ethic is very strong in Sauk County. The survey shows most area farmers are using a variety of conservation practices that effectively control soil erosion and are doing their part to protect their soil resource as well as our rivers, lakes, and streams.



Nutrient Management: Now and in the Future

Nutrient management is receiving a lot of attention lately at the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP), within the county land conservation offices, in the agricultural press, and among local farmers. This attention is a result of a new state statute, NR115, that will require a nutrient management plan for all farms in 2008.

The requirement is only two crop years away. As you remove corn silage, empty manure storage structures, or spread piled manure, you are implementing your 2006 nutrient management plan whether it is a professionally prepared plan or a plan you keep in your head. In two years, for the 2008 crop year, those mental plans are not going to suffice. Every farm applying fertilizers will need to prepare and follow a written plan based upon current soil tests and accurate crop nutrient removal values.

Dairy, beef, sheep, cash crop, and specialty crop farmers can all benefit from a written plan. Cash crop renters must also develop plans, even if they rent for only a single year.

Most Sauk County farms are small to medium sized, family owned and operated livestock enterprises where nutrient management plans written by the owner or operator fit perfectly. Mike Stanek of the Land Conservation Department staff is a certified crop advisor that helps farmers develop their own nutrient management plan. "The plan prepared by a farmer is the best plan possible," Stanek states. "When an operator prepares their own plan, they have a much better understanding and awareness of its importance. Because they prepare it themselves, they have a good understanding of what is required as they apply manure or commercial fertilizers."

The new laws will help to reduce excess fertilizer and prevent the resulting pollution. It could also help you to save money by taking full credit for the nutrients stored in your soil and in decomposing plant and animal waste.

Nutrient Management Planning Class
Reedsburg MATC
September 15, 22, 29
12:30-3:30
Scholarships Available

To help farmers understand the new requirements and the basics of these plans, the Reedsburg Campus of the Madison Area Technical College will be holding a nutrient management planning class this September. The class will meet three consecutive Thursdays from 12:30 until 3:30 starting September 15. The class fee is $80.50 and earns one credit. The class is taught by Doug Marshall, Farm Training Instructor, with assistance from Paul Dietmann, UW-Extension Agricultural Agent, and Mike Stanek. Participants that are willing to devote an additional 12 hours of work will be able to complete a nutrient management plan for their farm that will meet the requirements of the new nonpoint pollution rules. The plan can be prepared either manually or through the SNAP computer program.

The Land Conservation Committee is offering scholarships to cover the class fee for the first ten people to sign up. To enroll for these classes, please contact, Doug Marshall at 524-7727.