



THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS® *of the Fairfax Area*

Wanda Wastewatcher Revisited

Stormwater Runoff

by Judy Prochko, E.Q. Committee

Last May, the unit discussions focused on options for providing adequate drinking water for the metropolitan Washington area in the first half of the 21st century. Little did we know, at the time, that the drought that started in mid-1998 would continue through the summer of 1999, and give us all reason to consider the value of our most precious resource. Concern about drought ebbs and flows depending on precipitation levels. However, the region's growing population will make increasing demands on water quantity and make water quality a worrisome issue.

Each of us has a role to play in conserving water and improving water quality by the way we use water and manage our land. It is so easy to take water for granted when it is provided by a local utility. Those who depend on well water are more susceptible and perhaps more attune to the vagaries of nature and are, therefore, more vigilant and conservation minded. However, city dwellers have opportunities to conserve water, too. When I resourced the Hollin Hills Evening unit last May, Carla B. shared with us her creative use of rainwater. Here is her story: She had observed during a storm that the water that ran down her downspouts was carried by underground pipes directly to the street. Meanwhile, her parched lawn was gasping for that gift from the heavens. Underground drains are an accepted method for protecting a home from standing water that might end up in the basement, but Carla was determined to find a way to utilize this runoff to her advantage. She disconnected the underground pipes and hooked them up to above-ground extendable pipes, which she calls her "green lawn watering machines". She says that once you extend the drain about six feet from the house, you could use perforated tubing to disperse the rainwater wherever you want it. The plastic tubing can be rolled up during dry weather to protect the grass from being suffocated. During a storm, the force of the water will make it unroll automatically. She suggests you check your local hardware store for more ideas. You also should continue to assess your reengineering project to make sure it is performing as you intended.

Not only does Carla's lawn benefit from this new arrangement, so does the environment. Water that is allowed to filter down through the lawn to the water table is far better than water that goes directly to the gutter where it picks up debris, spilled oil, and toxic metals. and carries them directly, in a torrent, to the nearest waterway, ultimately affecting water quality in the entire watershed. So, the next time it rains, watch what happens to the runoff around your property. Perhaps there are ways to redirect the excess water to benefit your lawn or garden and the environment. What a bargain!

What is Stormwater Runoff?

(Printed with permission from the Northern Virginia Soil and Water Conservation District Newsletter January/February 2000)

Stormwater is water from precipitation that flows across the ground when it rains or when snow and ice melt. Some of the water seeps into the ground. Water that is not absorbed and thus flows across the surface to storm drains, streams, and rivers is called runoff.

Runoff can pose a threat to the quality of water in our streams and rivers because of the pollution it carries. Every drop of precipitation that strikes the soil loosens particles that wash away and end up as sediment in streams. Sediment and other debris clog fish gills, damage fish habitat, and block the light needed for plants to survive. In addition to sediment, runoff carries other pollutants it encounters on the ground and pavement. Common pollutants include oil, gasoline, and antifreeze dripped by cars and trucks; chemicals used on lawns and gardens; litter from improperly disposed trash; and livestock and pet waste.

What can an individual do to reduce the pollutants in stormwater runoff?

- **Landscape with grass, shrubs, trees, and other plants to hold the soil together, lessening the chance of erosion.**
- **Retain and maintain natural wooded area, including the forest floor, to filter runoff.**
- **Use mulch and other soil amendments to increase absorption of runoff.**
- **Pick up pet waste and dispose of it with your household garbage.**
- **Have your soil tested every three years and fertilize accordingly.**
- **Recycle used motor oil, and keep your car in good repair.**
- **And always remember that storm drains are not trash cans. They lead directly to streams, depositing runoff and all of the pollutants carried with it. Please don't dump in storm drains!**