

Get your garden out of the gutter: Surfrider Foundation's Ocean Friendly Gardens Program™



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What does ocean health and clean surf have to do with a garden? A lot. Water has been seen as a hazard by traditional city building codes, sending it off the property as quickly as possible. Rain gutter downspouts are typically directed onto hard surfaces like driveways, which slope to street gutters and storm drains and are piped to creeks, streams, and the ocean. Even on a dry day, millions of gallons of water flow down streets, from sprinklers that are broken or that overshoot grassy parkways, and from residents washing cars and hosing down driveways.

Meanwhile, between 40 and 70 percent of typical home water use is applied outdoors, in the landscape—often, with non-native plants or turf grass that no one uses. When you think about it, it's an insane idea: Let free rainwater flood away onto an impermeable, polluted surface like a street, then spend a bunch of money and energy to pipe in water from some other community to water our landscapes.

Not only does this practice waste money, water, and energy, it also introduces risks to human health and our waterways. For cities like Los Angeles with storm drains that are separate from sewer pipes (common throughout the country), urban runoff gets virtually no treatment to clean it up. Urban runoff is now the number-one source of ocean pollution. Everything from pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers as well as sediment, exhaust, oil, brake-pad dust, and dog poop end up in that water as it flows toward our freshwater systems and oceans.

As a result, surfers and ocean users have become the canary in the coal mine in terms of water quality. We weigh getting intestinal infections or skin rashes against missing out on good surfing during a rainstorm, when waves are often best.

Stormwater-capture Transformation: A downspout at the corner of this Ventura, Calif. residence once flooded water downslope to the street. After a Ocean Friendly Gardens workshop, earthworks captured water in the yard—supporting a lush garden the following year.

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