

RainWise Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

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What is RainWise, and Who Can Participate

What is RainWise?

RainWise is a program offered by Seattle Public Utilities (SPU) and King County Wastewater Treatment Division (WTD). RainWise pays rebates for cisterns and rain gardens on private properties in parts of Seattle. The goal of RainWise is to reduce the amount of stormwater entering the sewer system. When too much stormwater enters the sewer, the sewer can overflow into local bodies of water.

How can I participate in RainWise?

If you live in an eligible area, you can control the stormwater on your property by working with a contractor to install a cistern or rain garden or both! Check your address at [Eligibility - RainWise](#) to see if you are in a RainWise area.

Why are only some properties and some parts of Seattle eligible for RainWise?

RainWise aims to reduce stormwater in the sewer, so only properties whose runoff flows into the sewer system are eligible. Properties where runoff enters a separate stormwater pipe, is absorbed on site, or enters another form of stormwater detention are not eligible for RainWise.

How do I know if my property is eligible?

First, check if your property is in a RainWise area by visiting [Eligibility - RainWise](#) and typing in your address. If you are in an eligible area, you will see a pop-up window that will provide a link to complete a short form to check that your property meets all requirements. If you don't have internet access and need assistance, call the Garden Hotline at 206-633-0224.

Why is my neighbor eligible for RainWise but my property is not?

Each property is unique. Your property may be connected to a different drainage pipe than your neighbor, or you might have other stormwater management on your property.

Why does the map say I'm eligible for a cistern but not a rain garden?

Not all properties are suitable for a rain garden. Slopes and soil type can impact whether a rain garden is approved. A rain garden needs to drain effectively over time so there is no standing water. In some areas, absorbing more water on a site with steep slopes could de-stabilize the soil and cause landslide or flooding issues.

What if I sell my property?

Property owners sign an Agreement to maintain their system for 5-years for most properties or 10-years for larger roof projects. During the term of the Agreement, if the owner lists the property for sale, the owner must provide written notice of the intention to sell.

No later than three days after listing, the owner will notify RainWise in writing of the intention to sell.

Homeowner will make agents and buyers aware of this agreement via MLS Form 17, Seller Disclosure Form. All notices, written or email required under this Agreement shall be given by email or written to the following:

Mail: SPU RainWise 700 5th Avenue, Suite 4900 P.O. Box 34018 Seattle, WA 98124-4018 **OR**

Email: RainWise@seattle.gov

I'm not in a RainWise area. Can I still install a rain garden or cistern?

Yes, but you will not be eligible for a RainWise rebate. However, you may qualify for a GSI Mini Grant. These grants are available through Stewardship Partners to anyone in the King County Wastewater Treatment Service Area. They fund green infrastructure projects like rain gardens and cisterns, along with depaving, green roofs, and tree/Grattix boxes. Learn more about [GSI Mini Grants on the Stewardship Partners website](#).

RainWise contractors are also available to work on non-RainWise projects, so they can be a good starting point for your project. Use the filters on the [Find a Contractor page](#) to see companies that do the type of work you are interested in. You can also learn more about how to install your own rain gardens by visiting [12,000 Rain Gardens - Stewardship Partners](#).

Rebates for rain gardens & cisterns

Will new areas become eligible in the future?

Possibly. Areas are opened to RainWise based on the need to reduce stormwater entering the sewers. The newest area was opened in the Magnolia neighborhood in June 2026.

I have more questions. How can I learn more?

Check [RainWise - Events](#) for upcoming information sessions. You can find a [recording of past sessions on our website](#). If you have specific questions that aren't answered here, please email us at rainwise@seattle.gov.

Rebates and Cost

What is the rebate amount that I will get?

The rebate is based on the amount of roof area that the RainWise system collects water from. The rebate for rain gardens is \$13.12 per square foot of roof area, and up to \$9.91 per square foot for cisterns, depending on how many cisterns and how big they are. The average rebate covers about 85% of projects costs. Some projects may be fully covered by the rebate, while other projects will have out of pocket expenses for the property owner. Your contractor will be able to calculate the rebate amount before you get started.

Why is the rebate amount for cisterns lower than for rain gardens?

Cisterns qualify for a lower rebate amount because they are not as efficient as rain gardens. Cisterns are fitted with a special washer that slows the flow of water during storm events. This prevents overflowing the sewer system, but that water eventually enters the sewer. Rain gardens infiltrate, or let the water soak into the soil, thereby removing the water from the sewer system entirely.

Do I have to pay the contractor up front?

You and your contractor will work out a payment arrangement. RainWise contractors are independent businesses and all have their own business practices. Some contractors offer a Vendor Payment Option (VPO) in which the contractor pays all expenses up front and then receives the rebate directly.

I can't afford to pay upfront costs or to pay any out-of-pocket costs. Is there financial support available?

Some contractors offer a Vendor Payment Option (VPO) in which the contractor pays expenses up front, and the rebate is then sent to the contractor. Look at the contractor profiles on the Find a Contractor page to see which contractors offer VPO: [Find A Contractor - RainWise](#). You may also qualify for an Access Grant of up to \$1000. You can learn more here: [RainWise Access Grants - Stewardship Partners](#).

How long does it take to get the rebate?

A rebate takes 6-8 weeks to process once a completed rebate application packet is submitted. Missing items can slow down the process.

Rebates for rain gardens & cisterns

Has a rebate ever been denied?

We have never denied a rebate. Following the program guidelines ensures you will receive a rebate.

Is the rebate taxable?

Yes. A RainWise rebate is considered taxable income, and you will receive a 1099 form. To understand how a rebate can affect your tax liability, consult a tax professional.

Will a RainWise system decrease my stormwater fee?

Single family homes generally do not manage enough stormwater to qualify for the Stormwater Facility Credit (SFC). You can find more information about the credit by searching “Stormwater Facility Credits” on seattle.gov, or go directly to [Stormwater Facility Credit - Utilities | seattle.gov](http://seattle.gov/stormwater/facility-credit).

Construction

How do I work with a contractor on a RainWise project?

Once you know your property is eligible, you will go to the [Find A Contractor page](#) to find a RainWise-trained contractor who meets your needs. Your next step is to contact them directly. Just like with any home remodeling project, you may want to consider several contractors, see examples of their work, and check references.

Once you find a RainWise contractor you want to work with, they will come out, measure your roof, and you can talk about options. They will also help calculate the rebate amount you could get depending on the options you agree on. If you choose to move forward, the contractor creates a site plan, does a test to make sure your soil drains (for rain gardens only), and schedules a free pre-inspection to get the green light to go ahead and build the system. Once built, there is a final inspection, and the paperwork is sent in for the rebate to be processed.

Can I or someone I know build a RainWise project?

Only projects completed by a RainWise-trained contractor are eligible for a rebate. If you or someone you know is interested in becoming a RainWise contractor, please email rainwise@seattle.gov.

How long do projects typically take to install?

The actual construction can take less than a week. Scheduling inspections, modifications to the installation, and paperwork can add to the timeframe.

I have a small yard. Can I fit a rain garden or cistern?

There are many different sizes of cisterns available, and rain gardens can be many shapes and sizes to accommodate different sized yards. Find out by contacting a RainWise contractor and arranging a site visit.

Does a RainWise system have to collect water from the whole roof?

No. RainWise requires a minimum of 400 square feet of roof area to be collected.

Cistern Basics

What is a cistern?

A cistern is a large above-ground container used to collect roof water. It is like a huge rain barrel and can hold 200 or more gallons of water. During the winter months, a RainWise cistern holds rain to reduce the amount of stormwater entering the sewer system. They have a special valve that is kept open to allow water to pass through very slowly. This water slowly goes into either a rain garden, into the landscape, or to a side sewer connection. In April, the valve can be closed if you want to collect rain for watering your landscape during the summer.

How do cisterns help with water quality?

Cisterns help water quality by allowing any sediment in roof runoff to settle out before entering the combined sewer system.

How do I maintain my cistern?

1. Check cistern screen for debris each month.
2. Check the inside of your cistern once a year in September to remove any sediment that passed through the screen.
3. Keep the valve open during the fall-winter months. This will allow excess water to safely and slowly exit the cistern.
4. Close the overflow valve in mid-April to start saving for summer watering. It is easy to open and close the release valve. Your contractor will show you how.

For more information on RainWise maintenance and to watch our cistern care video, visit: [Maintenance - RainWise](#).

I'm worried about how a cistern will look. What can I do to make my cistern blend in?

There are many different styles and colors of cisterns available. Your contractor can work with you to select one that will blend in, or select a site where it won't stand out. Cisterns can also be painted to match your house, and you can use plants and features like trellises to help your cistern fit in.

Can I add a pump to increase water pressure for watering my yard?

Yes, your contractor can recommend a pump and attach to a hose spigot. The pump is not covered by the rebate. We also have [instructions for a simple DIY pump option](#).

Is it safe to water my food garden with water from my cistern?

It depends on the roofing material. Do not water edibles with runoff and eat rain garden plants from treated wood-shake roofs or others treated with toxic agents.

Other suggestions include:

1. Do not collect water from the first heavy rain after a dry spell
2. Water the soil instead of pouring it on to the plant leaves
3. Clean cisterns to remove collected sediment

For more information, read: sightline.org/2015/01/07/a-green-light-for-using-rain-barrel-water-on-gardenedibles

Rain Garden Basics

What is a rain garden? How is it different than other gardens?

A rain garden is a bowl-shaped garden containing spongy soil and a variety of plants that thrive in the Seattle area. A RainWise rain garden collects water from your roof downspout(s) and allows it to soak into the ground.

How do rain gardens help with water quality?

Rain gardens are great tools for protecting water quality. Rain gardens filter anything in the water through a spongy soil layer before the water absorbs, or infiltrates, into the ground beneath it.

What types of plants can I grow in a rain garden?

You will work with your contractor to choose plants based on what you like and what will grow well in your yard. Plants in rain gardens have unique requirements. You will choose plants for the garden's base that like wet conditions; plants on the sides that can take wet or dry soil; and plants on the top that are drought-tolerant in the summertime. RainWise requires a mix of deciduous and evergreen plants to provide four-season coverage. Native plants are not required, but they work well in rain gardens as they evolved for our climate and provide habitat for birds and pollinators. You can find out more about rain garden plants in the [RainWise planting plans](#) and the [Rain Garden Handbook for Western Washington](#).

Should I worry about moss in my rain garden?

No. Having moss in the garden is just part of living in the northwest. Moss is a healthy addition to the other plants that will help soak up and filter the stormwater flowing into your rain garden. Please don't use any chemical that kills or removes moss in your rain garden.

How long will a rain garden last?

Rain gardens just get better with age! As the plants get larger and microbes in the soil multiply, your rain garden will absorb and filter stormwater more and more effectively. To keep your rain garden working at its best, be sure to follow maintenance practices including mulching, weeding, and watering. Learn more about caring for your rain garden on our [RainWise maintenance page](#) which has written guides and videos.

The PVC pipes are the only part of the installation that may need replacement if they are not painted. These pipes take your stormwater from the roof or cistern and may become brittle if they're not painted for protection against UV rays. Work with your contractor to decide whether you or your contractor will paint the pipes.

Does a rain garden attract mosquitoes?

A rain garden is not a pond, which tends to attract mosquitoes. The rain garden will hold standing water for 1-2 days, which is less than the time it takes mosquito eggs larvae to hatch. Also, mosquitoes generally show up during the summer when there isn't much rain.

Can I put a rain garden in the space between the sidewalk and the street?

RainWise rebates are only for cisterns and rain gardens on private property, and do not include city land or the right-of-way between the sidewalk and the street. In some Seattle neighborhoods, you may see rain gardens or bioswales in the right-of-way that were constructed as part of a capital infrastructure project.

Maintenance

How do I maintain my system?

Find written guides and videos on how to care for both cisterns and rain gardens on our [RainWise maintenance webpage](#).

What if I need help maintaining my RainWise installation?

Many contractors are very happy to set up an ongoing maintenance contract during your rebate process. Maintenance is critical to keep the installations functioning properly, so please talk about maintenance with your contractor. You find written guides and videos on how to care for both cisterns and rain gardens on our [RainWise maintenance webpage](#).

Understanding the Combined Sewer System & Sewer Connections

What is a combined sewer system?

In Seattle, like many older cities, sewer pipes carry both wastewater (all the water that comes from toilets and down the drain in homes and businesses) and stormwater (rain or snow that washes off roofs, streets, and parking lots) to a sewage treatment plant. In many parts of Seattle, the mixed wastewater and stormwater flow together in a single pipe. This is called a combined sewer system.

The combined sewer system was built as Seattle grew during the early 1900s as an economical way to handle wastewater and stormwater. One advantage of this system is that, most of the time, when rainfall is low to moderate, both the stormwater and wastewater go to the treatment plant before being discharged to Puget Sound or other waterways.

What is a Combined Sewer Overflow (CSO) and why do they happen?

During a heavy rain, the pipes in a combined sewer system may fill up and overflow into a nearby waterway. When this happens, it's called a Combined Sewer Overflow (CSO). This acts as a "safety valve" that prevents back-ups of untreated wastewater into homes and businesses, flooding in city streets, or bursting underground pipes.

What maps and other tools do you use to see if my property is eligible?

RainWise staff and partners use the [Seattle Public Utilities' Water & Sewer Map](#), along with side sewer cards, and construction permits to learn about how your property is connected to the sewer system. We also rely on information from property owners about how downspouts are connected to understand where the water from the roof flows, and whether it contributes to combined sewer overflows.

What is a side sewer? What if my side sewer needs repair?

Your side sewer is the pipe that connects your home to the sewer main in the public right of way. Side sewers are privately owned and maintained. To learn more about side sewers, go to [Your Side Sewer - Utilities | seattle.gov](#).

Special Property Considerations

I'm part of an HOA. Are there restrictions for condo units?

These are often much larger roofs, and we have a special team of staff to do this work. Email <mailto:rainwise@seattle.gov> with specific questions about your property and to check the property's eligibility.

I have two houses in Seattle. Can I install RainWise at both properties?

Yes! Each property will go through a different rebate. Your contractor will help you with each step of the process and you may hire the same contractor for both properties.

If a group of neighbors want to install RainWise, could they combine their projects into one larger project?

Each property would be a separate project. A group of neighbors can get together and use one contractor to install a separate system at each of their homes. The contractor might be able to lower the price by doing multiple projects.

My house is new or I've done a big renovation. Can I still participate?

Probably not. New construction or new renovations usually require stormwater management on site. If your property already has other stormwater management, it is not RainWise eligible. To find out, check the [RainWise eligibility map](#) first. If you are in an eligible area, complete the short eligibility form that is linked in the pop-up window that will appear.

Can renters qualify?

Renters can be a great catalyst to get a property a RainWise installation, but all agreements and paperwork must be completed by the property owner. RainWise staff members can support renters and others with resources and information to provide to property owners.

Additional Questions – Less Frequently Asked

General RainWise

How does RainWise protect salmon and other marine life?

When a combined sewer overflow occurs, polluted water enters Puget Sound, the Duwamish River, and lakes. This contaminated water threatens the health of salmon and other fish, along with otters, orcas, and other marine life. Fewer overflows means cleaner water for our local marine life.

What if I don't have gutters or my gutters need repairs?

You must have gutters and downspouts to capture roof runoff and direct it to your rain garden(s) or cistern(s). Installation or repair of gutters is not covered by the rebate. Your contractor can recommend businesses that specialize in gutter work.

If additional work is needed after the final inspection, will this be covered by the rebate?

This depends on your agreement with your contractor. If your contractor is basing their estimate on the labor and materials it takes to build the rain garden or cistern and these hours exceed the rebate amount, then you may need to pay more. When you negotiate with your contractor you may want to raise this possibility and talk through possible solutions. Corrections following inspections tend to be fairly minor and take little time.

I saw a RainWise project I liked, can you tell me who the contractor is that built it?

Yes! Send us the addresses of the installation you like and we will look up the contractor. Email us at rainwise@seattle.gov.

I live in an older house, and my side sewers are not shown on the sewer cards. I'm not sure how things are connected. How do I find out where my water flows?

There may be visual clues, especially if your downspouts flow onto your yard or driveway. First, look for property records: previous owners may have had the sewer scoped, or may have documented construction and repairs through the permit process. The City of Seattle has an [online system to view permit records](#). You may need to have your side sewer scoped to understand how your home is connected to the sewer system. Side sewer scoping is not covered by RainWise rebates.

Rain Gardens

Can I choose not to have a rain garden? We already have water issues on our property.

Yes, just because you are eligible doesn't mean you must have a rain garden. However, a rain garden included in the design increases your rebate amount, and many people find that a rain garden can help to solve flooding problems.

Rebates for rain gardens & cisterns

Will the rebate cover the cost of moving a tree to make room for a rain garden?

No. Trees may not be removed in order to install a RainWise rain garden. A tree has stormwater value too! It is far better to keep the tree and locate your rain garden in a different place to achieve additional stormwater management.

Will the rebate cover removing paving or a deck to make room for a rain garden?

The rebate will cover the cost of removal for only the area that will be replaced by a rain garden. If the patio or other impervious surface is far bigger than a rain garden, the full cost will not be covered.

Cisterns

Will my cistern get algae in it?

The cisterns approved for use in RainWise are opaque and won't allow light in for algae to grow. Cisterns still require minimal maintenance but algae will not be a problem to control. Find more about caring for your cistern on our [Maintenance webpage](#).

Can I set up my cistern to be able to use the rainwater for in-home uses like flushing toilets or doing laundry?

While cisterns can be used in this manner, we do not currently rebate or have any kind of incentives for these kinds of systems. To be eligible for a RainWise rebate, the cistern must be equipped with a low flow orifice that drains the tank from September through mid-April, because the focus of the program is to control stormwater runoff. Rainwater harvesting for indoor use requires specialized plumbing and permits. We recommend careful planning, securing required permits, and working with a contractor if you choose to pursue this.

Can a cistern be set below grade?

No, cisterns need to be at grade or elevated to maintain positive flow away from your building.

What happens to the excess water when the cistern fills up during a storm?

During the rainy season, the valve on the cistern is left open, and a washer with a small hole allows the water to flow through very slowly. This holds back the water during the storm, but allows the cistern to empty before the next storm. There is also an overflow that will direct any excess water to a dispersion trench, side sewer, or another cistern.

How long does a cistern last?

The cisterns have a life expectancy of at least 20 years. Washers or valves may need to be replaced sooner.