



# A Rain Garden Guide

for King County  
*RainScapes: Natural Rainwater Solutions*  
(and elsewhere rain gardens are found)



Vaughn Bell Studio



# Welcome to your rain garden!

*This guide will provide inspiration and information for the design, planting and care of the rain garden on your property. The guide was created for use in the King County Water and Land Resources Division (WLRD) RainScapes Program, but is also intended as a resource for others creating rain gardens in King County, WA.*

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# 1. what is a rain garden?

A rain garden collects rain water that drains into a depressed area, and allows the water to slowly sink into the ground. It cleans the water by filtering the water through the soil, and plants in the rain garden help this process. A rain garden is one type of Green Stormwater Infrastructure (GSI), also called Natural Drainage.

## a rain garden is... a tool to clean the water



*a rain garden is a little engine of healing*

By cleaning the water, the rain garden improves the health of humans and many other species. It also creates joy by adding beauty to the environment.



## a rain garden is... a multi-species habitat



The rain garden is habitat for a multitude of plants and insects.

Planting selections in this rain garden guide include plants that help pollinators, especially native bees, by providing flowers in multiple seasons.

## a rain garden is... a hybrid landscape



The combination of human-made structure and “messy” plant life: roadside rain gardens on Kenyon Street and Murray CSO facility in West Seattle.

Rain gardens are part of the urban environment. Many are located in parking lots or adjacent to buildings, roads and sidewalks. These locations are hybrids of human-built and natural environments. Rain gardens must be designed to thrive in these locations that present specific conditions of heat, drought and water flow.



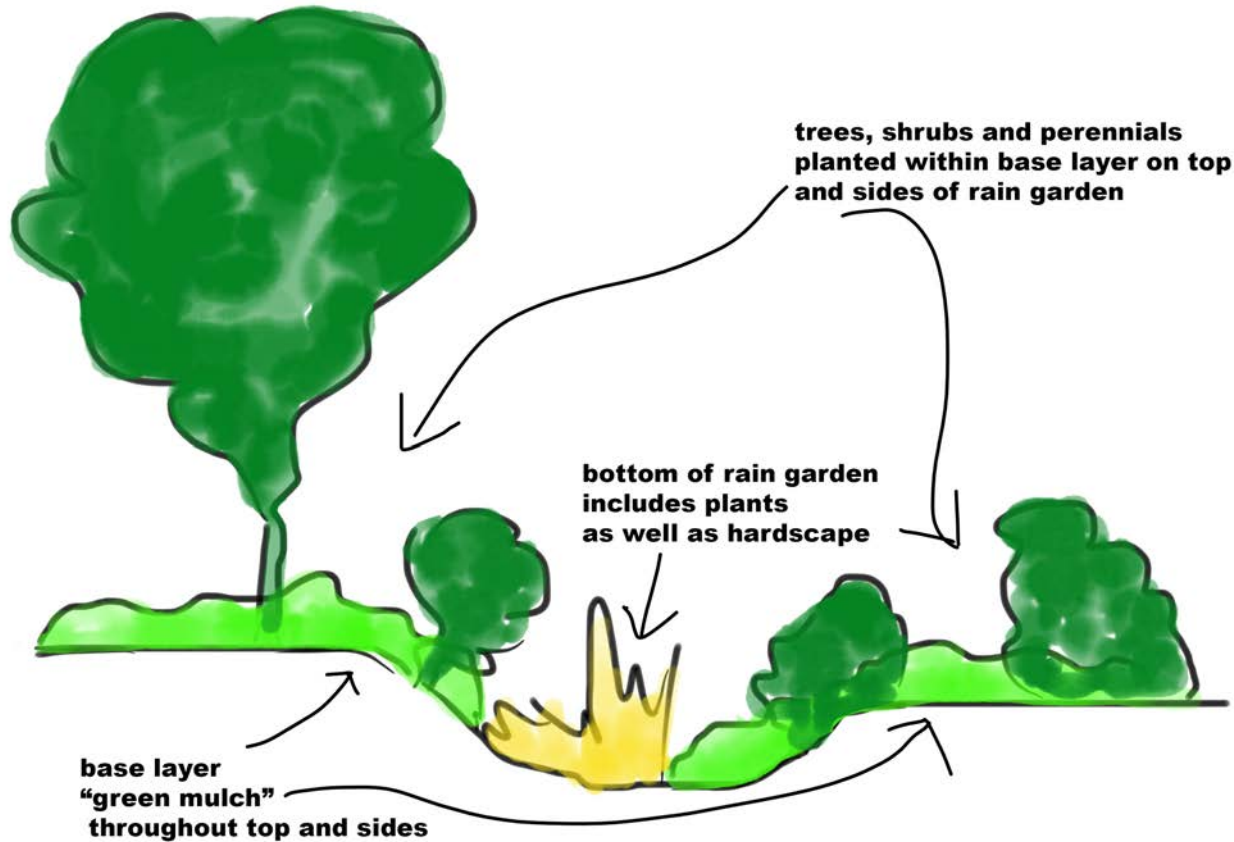
## **2. design and planting methods**

# design and planting method: steps

1. *Work with King County staff to determine the location and size for your rain garden.*
2. *Once you know where your garden is, staff can help you determine what are the conditions of the location: is it sunny, partially sunny, or shady?*
3. *Select a planting type from the choice of 4 included in this guide, based on the local conditions and your preferences.*
4. *In collaboration with staff, use the plant lists to determine a planting plan for your garden.*

For property owners who are working with King County WLRD, the design of a rain garden is a collaborative process with the County. County engineers will determine the technical details of the rain garden in order for it to function, but you get to help decide the aesthetics of the garden.

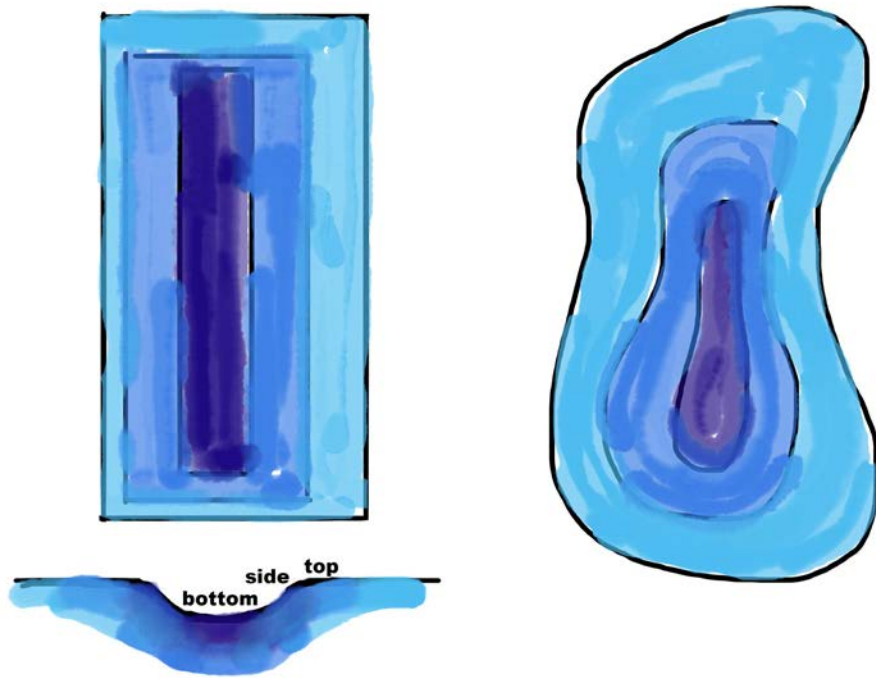
# design and planting method: layers



This rain garden guide outlines a framework for planting your rain garden. The precise layout of your rain garden will depend on the site for your garden.

We recommend a method of planting in which a base layer of plants fills the surface of the garden. This method of using "green mulch" reduces weeds while being aesthetically pleasing. Pervious hardscape may also be included.

# design and planting method: layout and plant selection



The size and layout of your rain garden will depend on site conditions, but all rain gardens include graded topography to direct the flow of water. In the plant lists that follow, we identify planting locations based on top (T), side (S), or bottom (B) of garden.

Where possible, creating organic forms that visually suggest the flow of water can help create visual interest while revealing the function of the rain garden through its form.

FULL SUN=

**BEACH typology**

FULL or PART SUN=

**MEADOW typology**

FULL or PART SHADE=

**STREAMSIDE typology**

FULL SHADE=

**WOODLAND typology**

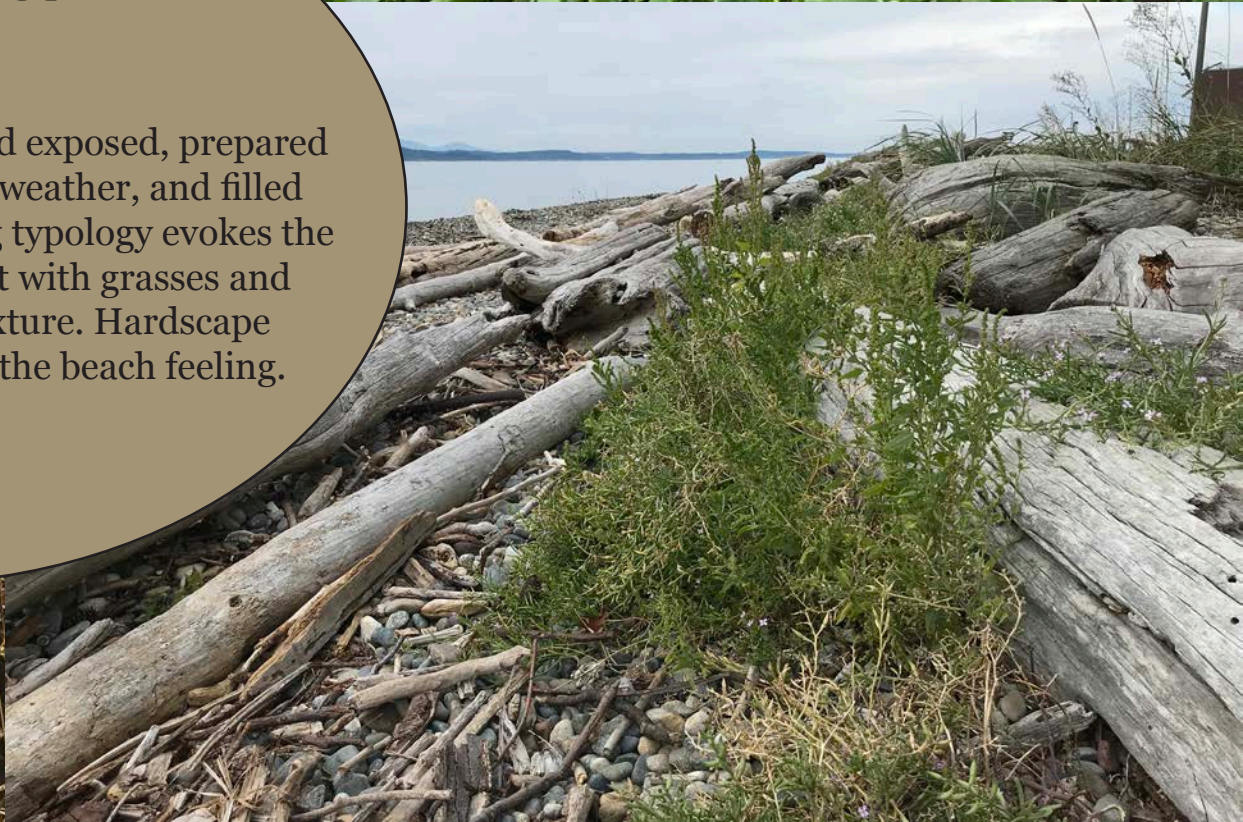
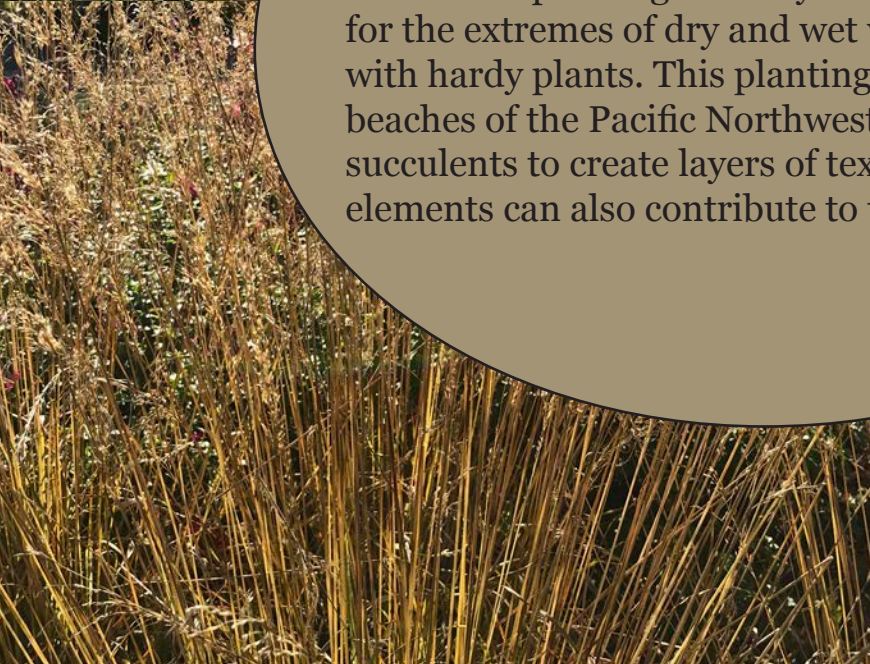
Four possible planting types are outlined in this guide. Select the planting for your rain garden based on the amount of sun and what appeals to you.





## planting typology: BEACH

The **beach** planting is sunny and exposed, prepared for the extremes of dry and wet weather, and filled with hardy plants. This planting typology evokes the beaches of the Pacific Northwest with grasses and succulents to create layers of texture. Hardscape elements can also contribute to the beach feeling.





# BEACH typology

grasses and succulents create layers of texture,  
color highlights through the seasons



winter feeling

summer feeling

# planting typology: BEACH

suggested location types: full sun

## Beach Typology

T=top S=side B=bottom

Plant		Height	Local Native	Rain Garden Location	Notes
<b>Base Layer</b>					
<i>Fragaria chiloensis</i>	Beach Strawberry	6"-10"	Yes	T, S	Evergreen; white flowers; vigorous spreader
<i>Rubus pentalobus</i>	Creeping Raspberry	1"-3"		T, S	Evergreen
<i>Rubus calycinoides</i>	Creeping Raspberry	2"		T, S	Evergreen
<i>Sedum oregonum</i>	Oregon Stonecrop	1"-8"	Yes	T	Yellow flowers in summer; evergreen
<b>Grasses</b>					
<i>Carex testacea</i>	Orange New Zealand Hair Sedge	12"-15"		B	Orange color through winter; mounding form
<i>Carex obnupta</i>	Slough Sedge	12'-18'	Yes	B	Requires wet soil
<i>Festuca glauca 'Elijah Blue'</i>	Blue Fescue	8"-12"		T	Blue color; clumping form
<i>Juncus acuminatus</i>	Taper-tipped rush	6"-18"	Yes	B	purple flowers in spring; spreading
<i>Juncus tenuis</i>	Slender Rush	6"-20"	Yes	S, B	Bright green; soft
<i>Sorghastrum nutans</i>	Indian Grass	4'-6'		T, S, B	Various hybrids available
<b>Flowering Plants</b>					
<i>Allium cernuum</i>	Nodding Onion	12"-18"	Yes	T, S	Pink flowers summer; attracts pollinators
<i>Armeria maritima</i>	Sea Thrift	6"	Yes	T	Pink flowers spring; mounding form
<i>Coreopsis verticillata</i>	Tickseed	18"-36"		T, S	Yellow flowers in summer; semi-evergreen; attracts pollinators
<i>Heliopsis var.</i>	False Sunflower varieties	24"-32"		S	Yellow flowers in summer; semi-evergreen; attracts pollinators
<i>Heuchera micrantha</i>	Small Flowered Alumroot	6"-24"	Yes	S	White flowers in summer; spreading
<i>Penstemon serrulatus</i>	Cascade Beardtongue	12'-24'	Yes	T, S, B	Purple flowers in summer; attracts hummingbirds
<i>Sedum species and hybrids</i>	Stonecrop	6"-24"		T	Pink flowers; various color foilage
<i>Symphytrichum chilense</i>	Pacific Aster	18"-36"	Yes	T, S	White to purple flowers in late summer; attracts pollinators
<b>Shrubs</b>					
<i>Cornus sericea 'Kelsey'</i>	Kelsey's Dwarf Red Osier Dogwood	18"-36"	Yes	T, S, B	White flowers; red twigs in winter; cultivar of native
<i>Spirea densiflora</i>	Sub-alpine spiraea	3'-4'	Yes	T, S	Pink flowers in summer; attracts pollinators
<b>Large Shrubs/Trees</b>					
<i>Holodiscus discolor</i>	Oceanspray	3'-10'	Yes	T, S	Creamy White flowers in summer; attracts pollinators
<i>Pinus contorta</i>	Shore Pine	30'-60'	Yes	T, S	Evergreen
<i>Salix hookeri</i>	Hooker's Willow	12'-18'	Yes	S, B	White flowers





## planting typology: **MEADOW**

The **meadow** planting is sunny and dry. Plants in the meadow are especially prepared for dry conditions. This planting typology evokes the meadows of the Pacific Northwest with a range of flowers, colors and textures and a focus on seasonal change.

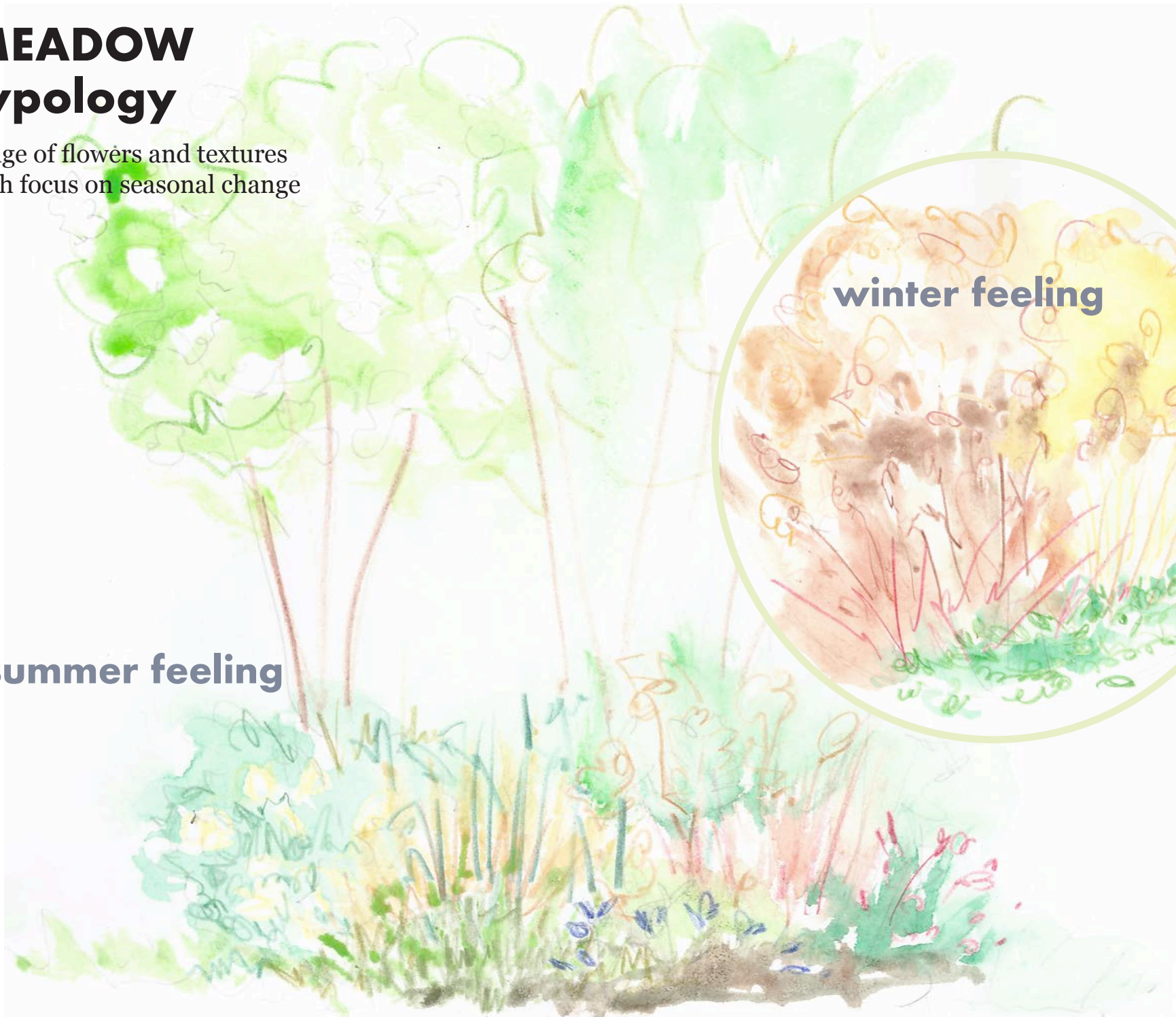


# MEADOW typology

range of flowers and textures  
with focus on seasonal change

summer feeling

winter feeling



# planting typology: MEADOW

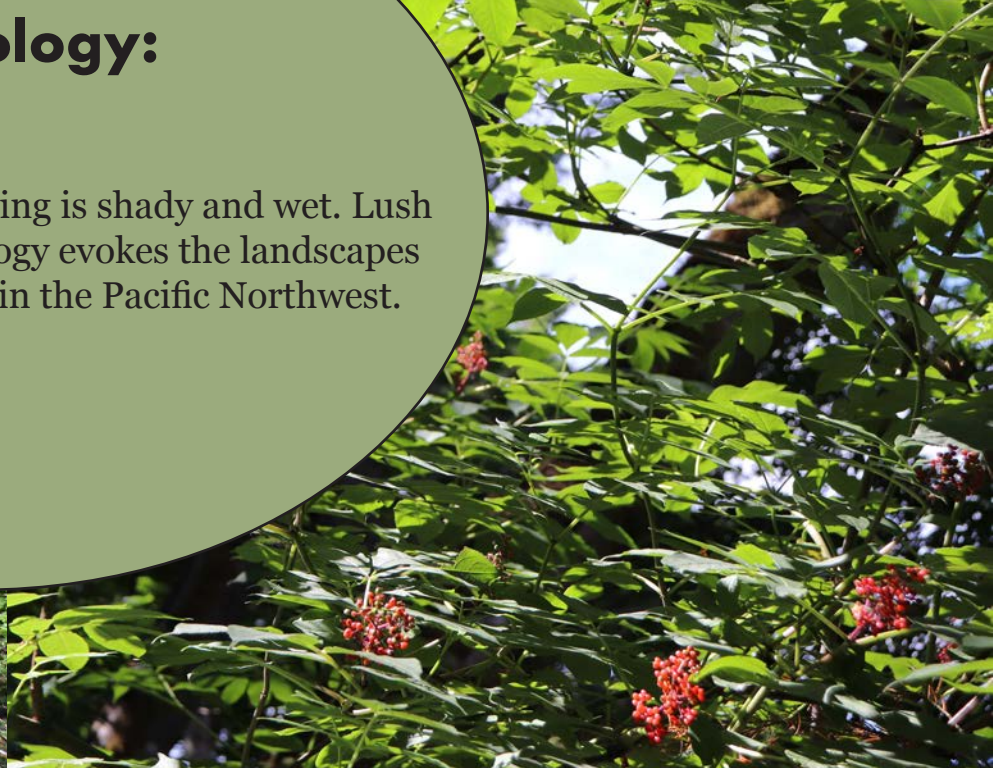
suggested location types: full to partial sun

## Meadow Typology

T= top S= side B= bottom

Plant		Height	Local Native	Rain Garden Location	Notes
<b>Base Layer</b>					
<i>Arctostaphylos uva-ursi</i> 'Vancouver Jade'	Vancouver Jade Kinnickinnick	6"		T, S	White flowers; native cultivar
<i>Eleocharis radicans</i>	Miniature Rush	2"-4"		B	Requires moisture
<i>Leptinella squalida</i> 'Platt's Black'	Platt's Black Brass Buttons	1"-3"		T, S, B	Purple foilage; spreading
<i>Sanguiorba minor</i> 'Little Angel'	Little Angel Burnet	4"-8"		S, B	Red flowers summer and fall
<b>Grasses</b>					
<i>Carex comans</i> 'Frosted Curls'	New Zealand Hair Sedge	12"-36"		T, S, B	Silvery leaves; spreading
<i>Carex testacea</i>	Orange New Zealand Hair Sedge	12"-15"		T, S, B	Orange color through winter; mounding form
<i>Deschampsia cespitosa</i>	Tufted Hair Grass	4'-8'	Yes	T, S, B	Moist to wet to well-drained; hummock forming, dense tufts
<i>Juncus patens</i>	Spreading Rush	12"-24"	Yes	S, B	Cultivars available; tolerates moisture
<i>Panicum virgatum</i> var.	Switchgrass	4'-6'		T, S	Wet to Dry
<i>Schoenoplectus tabernoemontani</i>	Softstem Bulrush	3'-9'	Yes	B	Wet
<i>Scirpus microcarpus</i>	Small-fruited Bulrush	2'-4'	Yes	B	Wet; spreads
<b>Flowering Plants</b>					
<i>Aquilegia formosa</i>	Western Columbine	12"-24"	Yes	T, S	Red & yellow flowers spring and summer; attracts pollinators
<i>Baptisia australis</i> var.	False Indigo	3'-4'		T	Purple & pink flowers in spring; attracts pollinators
<i>Camassia quamash</i>	Common Camas	12"-18"	Yes	S, B	Purple flowers spring and summer
<i>Iris tenax</i>	Oregon Iris	12"-24"	Yes	T	Purple flowers spring
<i>Lupinus polyphyllus</i>	Big Leaf Lupine	18"-42"	Yes	T, S, B	Purple flowers in spring; attracts pollinators
<i>Nepeta x faassenii</i>	Catmint	12"		T, S	Lavender flowers in summer; many cultivars
<i>Sidalcea hendersonii</i>	Henderson's Checker Mallow	1'-5'	Yes	S, B	Large pink flowers in summer; attracts pollinators
<i>Symphotrichum subspicatum</i>	Douglas Aster	6"-36"	Yes	T, S, B	Blue to purple flowers in late summer/fall; attracts pollinators
<i>Tarella trifoliata</i>	Foamflower	6"-10"	Yes	S, B	White flowers in spring/summer; spreads; attracts pollinators
<b>Shrubs</b>					
<i>Aronia melanocarpa</i> 'Low Scape Mound'	Low Scape Mound Chokeberry	12"-24"		S	White flowers in spring; deciduous with red fall color; attracts polinators
<i>Cornus sanguinea</i> 'Midwinter Fire'	Bloodtwig Dogwood	5'-6'		T, S, B	White flowers; red winter stems
<i>Mahonia aquifolium</i> 'Compacta'	Compact Oregon Grape Holly	2'-3'	Yes	T, S, B	Yellow flowers; evergreen late spring; attracts pollinators
<i>Spiraea alba</i>	White Meadowsweet	2'-3'		S, B	White flowers in spring; attracts pollinators
<i>Spiraea densiflora</i>	Subalpine Spiraea	3'-4'	Yes	T, S	Pink flowers in spring; attracts pollinators
<i>Spiraea japonica</i> dwarf var.	Dwarf Spiraea varieties	18"-30"		T, S	Various foilage and flower colors
<i>Symphocarpus x chanaultii</i>	Hancock Coralberry	2'		T, S	Magenta winter berries
<b>Trees</b>					
<i>Amelanchier alnifolia</i>	Western Serviceberry	3'-15'	Yes		White flowers in spring; edible fruit





## planting typology: **STREAMSIDE**

The **streamside** planting is shady and wet. Lush and layered, this typology evokes the landscapes around forest streams in the Pacific Northwest.



# STEAMSIDE typology

lush patterns and layers  
of green with seasonal color



**winter feeling**



**summer feeling**



# planting typology: STREAMSIDE

suggested location types: full to partial shade

## Streamside Typology

T= top S= side B=bottom

Plant		Height	Local Native	Rain Garden Location	Notes
<b>Base Layer</b>					
<i>Eleocharis radicans</i>	Miniature Rush	2"-4"		B	Requires moisture
<i>Fragaria vesca</i>	Woodland Strawberry	6"-12"	Yes	T, S	White flowers, edible berries
<i>Leptinella squalida</i> 'Minor Bras'	Alpine Brass Buttons	1"-2"		T, S	Green foilage; spreading
<i>Sanguiorba minor</i> 'Little Angel'	Little Angel Burnet	4"-8"			Red flowers summer and fall
<b>Grasses</b>					
<i>Carex comans</i>	New Zealand Hair Sedge	12"-36"		T, S, B	Spreading
<i>Deschampsia cespitosa</i>	Tufted Hair Grass	4'-8'	Yes	T, S, B	Moist to wet to well-drained; hummock forming, dense tufts
<b>Ferns</b>					
<i>Athyrium filix-femina</i>	Lady Fern	3'-5'	Yes	T, S, B	
<i>Blechnum spicant</i>	Deer Fern	12"-36"	Yes	T, S, B	
<b>Flowering Plants</b>					
<i>Aquilegia formosa</i>	Western Columbine	12"-24"	Yes	T, S	Red & yellow flowers spring and summer; attracts pollinators
<i>Symphotrichum subspicatum</i>	Douglas Aster	6"-36"	Yes	T, S, B	Blue to purple flowers in late summer/fall; attracts pollinators
<i>Tarella trifoliata</i>	Foamflower	6"-10"	Yes	S, B	White flowers in spring/summer; spreads;attracts pollinators
<i>Vancouveria hexandra</i>	Inside-out Flower	8"-18"	Yes	S	White flowers spring/summer; Semi-evergreen
<b>Shrubs</b>					
<i>Arctostaphylos uva-ursi</i> 'Vancouver Jade'	Vancouver Jade Kinnickinnick	6"	Yes	T, S	Evergreen; spreading
<i>Clethra alnifolia</i> 'Vanilla Spice'	Vanilla Spice Summersweet	3'-6'		T,S, B	White flowers summer/fall; yellow fall color; attracts pollinators;
<i>Gaultheria shallon</i>	Salal	3'-6'	Yes	T, S	Evergreen; spreading
<i>Lonicera pileata</i>	Boxwood Honeysuckle	3'			Evergreen; spreading; fragrant
<i>Vaccinium ovatum</i>	Evergreen Huckleberry	2'-6'	Yes	T, S	Evergreen; edible fruit
<b>Large Shrubs/Trees</b>					
<i>Acer circinatum</i>	Vine Maple	12-30'	Yes	T, S	Red-orange fall color
<i>Alnus rubra</i>	Red Alder	40-80'	Yes	S	
<i>Amelanchier alnifolia</i>	Western Serviceberry	5'-15'	Yes	T, S	White flowers; edible fruit
<i>Coryus cornuta</i>	Beaked Hazelnut	4'-12'	Yes	T, S	Edible seeds
<i>Myrica gale</i>	Sweet Gale	4-5'	Yes	B	Semi-evergreen; edible fruit
<i>Salix lasiandra</i>	Pacific Willow	15-40'	Yes	S, B	Deciduous





## planting typology: **WOODLAND**

The **woodland** planting is shady yet drier. This planting evokes wooded uplands in the Pacific Northwest. Plant selections refer to the diverse patterns and tones of the forest understory.



# WOODLAND typology

rich patterns of the  
shady forest floor

winter feeling



summer  
feeling



# planting typology: WOODLAND

suggested location types: full shade

## Woodland Typology

T=top S=side B=bottom

Plant		Height	Local Native	Rain Garden Location	Notes
<b>Base Layer</b>					
<i>Asarum caudatum</i>	Wild Ginger	4"-6"	Yes	T, S	Evergreen
<i>Eleocharis radicans</i>	Miniature Rush	2"-4"		B	Requires moisture
<i>Fragaria vesca</i>	Woodland Strawberry	6"-12"	Yes	T, S	White flowers, edible berries
<i>Fragaria virginiana</i>	Mountain Strawberry	4"-8"	Yes		White flowers, edible berries; drier soils
<i>Oxalis oregana</i>	Redwood Sorrel	4"-6"	Yes	T, S	White flowers; spreading
<b>Ferns</b>					
<i>Athyrium filix-femina</i>	Lady Fern	3'-5'	Yes	T, S, B	Deciduous
<i>Blechnum spicant</i>	Deer Fern	12"-36"	Yes	T, S, B	Evergreen
<i>Polystichum munitum</i>	Western Sword Fern	3'-4'	Yes	T, S	Evergreen
<i>Polypodium scoleri</i>	Leathery Polypody	6-12"		S, B	Evergreen; moist areas
<b>Flowering Plants</b>					
<i>Geranium cantabrigiense 'Biocova'</i>	Hardy Geranium	6'-8'		T, S	Pink to White flowers, semi-evergreen; may use as base layer
<i>Heuchera var.</i>	Coral Bells varieties	2'-3'		T, S	Varied foliage and bloom colors
<i>Iris tenax</i>	Oregon Iris	12"-24"	Yes	T	Purple flowers
<i>Tellima grandiflora</i>	Fringecup	8"-12"	Yes	S, B	Pink flowers in late spring; fragrant
<b>Shrubs</b>					
<i>Cotoneaster dammeri</i>	Bearberry Cotoneaster	6-12"		T, S	Evergreen; spreading
<i>Gaultheria shallon</i>	Salal	3'-6'	Yes	T, S	Evergreen; spreading
<i>Lonicera involucrata</i>	Black Twinberry	3'-6'	Yes	T, S, B	Yellow and red flowers in summer; deciduous
<i>Mahonia nervosa</i>	Dull Oregon Grape	12"-18"	Yes	T, S	Yellow flowers in spring; evergreen; attracts pollinators
<i>Rosa gymnocarpa</i>	Bald Hip Rose	2'-5'	Yes	T, S	Pink flowers in spring/summer; attracts wildlife
<i>Sarcococca hookeriana var Humilis</i>	Dwarf Sweetbox	1'-2'		T	Evergreen; spreading
<i>Symphocarpus albus</i>	Snowberry	2'-6'	Yes		Pink flowers in summer, white berries; spreading; attracts pollinators
<b>Large Shrubs/Trees</b>					
<i>Acer circinatum</i>	Vine Maple	12'-30'	Yes	T, S	Red-orange fall color
<i>Alnus rubra</i>	Red Alder	40'-80'	Yes	T, S	
<i>Coryus cornuta</i>	Beaked Hazelnut	4'-12'	Yes	T, S	Edible seeds
<i>Ribes sanguineum</i>	Red-flowering currant	3'-9'	Yes	T, S	white to red flowers in early spring; orange fall color; attracts pollinators

## **3. living with your rain garden**

# living with your rain garden: change is constant

*a garden is never finished*



Maintaining the rain garden for beauty and function is part of the joy of having it on your property. Over time, some plants will succeed more than others, and change will occur on multiple time scales, seasonally and year to year.

Rain garden plantings are intended to be resilient, taking in the realities of climate change and unpredictable nature of both weather and living things.

# living with your rain garden: embrace some wildness



*anticipate and embrace change*

*welcome a feral feeling*

Invasive plants, especially noxious weeds, must be removed from your rain garden. At the same time, embracing a natural aesthetic and a bit of disorder will allow you to enjoy the cycles of growth and decay in the garden.



# living with your rain garden: maintenance and resources

## GENERAL RAIN GARDEN INFORMATION

RainWise Program - Seattle Public Utilities and King County  
<https://www.700milliongallons.org/>

12,000 Rain Gardens  
<https://www.12000raingardens.org/>

Rain Gardens | Washington State University  
<https://extension.wsu.edu/raingarden/>

Rain Garden Handbook for Western Washington  
<https://fortress.wa.gov/ecy/publications/documents/1310027.pdf>

## MAINTENANCE

Duwamish Infrastructure Restoration Training (DIRT) Corps  
<https://www.thedirtcorps.com/>

## PLANT LISTS AND PLANS

King County Surface Water Design Manual  
<https://www.kingcounty.gov/services/environment/water-and-land/stormwater/documents/surface-water-design-manual.aspx>  
Chapter 6 has information about designing water quality features. Plant lists are included for different levels of inundation.

Native plant resources for the Pacific Northwest - King County  
<https://www.kingcounty.gov/services/environment/stewardship/nw-yard-and-garden/native-plant-resources-nw.aspx>  
This is the most comprehensive native plant online guide.

# living with your rain garden: more resources

## BOOKS

Many design books could be listed here, but here are a couple that give both specific examples and big-picture thinking:

*Artful Rainwater Design* by Stuart Echols and Eliza Pennypacker, Island, 2015

*Toward an Urban Ecology* by Kate Orff/Scape, Monacelli, 2016

*Rain Gardens for the Pacific Northwest* by Zsofia Pasztor and Keri DeTore, Skipstone, 2017

This is a guide for residential homeowners in the PNW who want to build their own rain gardens, and it has a plant guide and planting plans with cute drawings.

*Rain Gardens: Sustainable Landscaping for a Beautiful Yard and a Healthy World* by Steiner Domm, Voyageur, 2012

Similar to the book above, a guide for home gardens but without the regional PNW focus.

*Rain Gardens: Managing Water Sustainably in the Garden and Designed Landscape* by Dunnett and Clayden, Timber, 2007

Overview of rain garden design on residential as well as other types of sites with international case studies and design examples, with plant lists.

*Creating Rain Gardens: Capturing Rain for Your Own Water-Efficient Garden* by Woelf-Erskine and Uncapher, Timber, 2012

This is a how-to guide for residential homeowners and others who want to build their own rain gardens, with case studies included.

# bee inspired



# credits and thanks

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[www.4culture.org](http://www.4culture.org)

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All photographs and drawings are by Vaughn Bell.  
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