

DID YOU KNOW?

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The Wissahickon Valley, a part of Philadelphia's Fairmount Park, is a National Natural Landmark, and one of the few remaining urban wilderness areas in the United States. It comprises approximately 1,800 acres with 75 miles of trails, and is one of the most heavily used sections of Fairmount Park.

One of the great pleasures of living in this area is the opportunity to enjoy the beautiful Wissahickon Creek. However, while scenic, the creek is not as healthy as it should be. It occasionally suffers from unplanned releases from upstream sewage treatment plants and factories that discharge directly into its waters. But the main culprit by far?

Excess stormwater runoff.

Why is stormwater runoff a problem?

Streams are fed by groundwater, which is water that seeps underground from rainfall then bubbles up through springs to feed streams and creeks. The trouble is that **too many paved surfaces and rooftops prevent rainfall from percolating underground** to feed streams.

When it rains, stormwater pours across these impervious, hard-paved surfaces like asphalt and concrete through which rainfall cannot penetrate, and flows immediately into storm drains on your street. **Storm drains do not connect to the city's sewage system—the drains deliver untreated water directly to the Wissahickon Creek.**

Consequently, the Wissahickon is hit with a one-two punch:

- **FIRST**, water levels have dropped over time because rainfall is no longer soaking into the ground to feed groundwater.
- **SECOND**, during a rainstorm or snow melt, storm drains deliver huge amounts of water directly into the creek. Rainfall gushing into the stream scours the banks and carves cliffs, depositing silt and mud on the once-rocky bottom—the habitat needed by clean-stream creatures.



Are you accidentally hurting the creek?

The problem is compounded by other common practices. Development often strips vegetation from the land, allowing bare soil to erode into the stream. This practice also may expose formerly shaded creek tributaries to direct sunlight, raising the water's temperature and stressing underwater life. Contractors and pool companies sometimes pour paints and noxious fluids down storm drains, and homeowners inadvertently pollute the creek with herbicides and fertilizers that wash off their lawns during rainfall.



As a homeowner in the Wissahickon watershed, you can take important steps to improve the health of the creek by: slowing the speed of water off your property to allow it to seep underground; providing more porous and unpaved surfaces in your yard to soak up stormwater; and striving to keep chemicals and soil runoff from tainting the creek.

10 Simple Steps

The Friends of the Wissahickon invites you to become a partner in safeguarding the Wissahickon Creek by using these 10 simple steps.

1 Branch out

Plant native trees and plants. A mature tree's massive network of leaves slows rainfall during a storm, reducing the speed that raindrops hit the ground and slowing the erosion of soil into the stream. Also, native plants and trees absorb rain like sponges, and leaves drip rainfall onto the ground for hours after a storm, giving more water a chance to seep slowly underground. A tree's roots hold the soil, which prevents soil from washing into the creek. **Contact FOW for help in choosing trees and shrubs that are best for this purpose or consult the plant list at: www.fairmountpark.org/nativeandinvasiveplants.asp.**

2 Roll out the barrel

Rainfall flows down rooftops into gutters and downspouts, then gushes down driveways to flow into the street and storm drains. To slow water down—and save money on your water bill—consider an old-fashioned remedy, the rain barrel. Place the barrel under a downspout, then capture water for garden and lawn. When you water with it, the rain returns to the soil, just as nature intended. **The FOW sponsors workshops in conjunction with the Philadelphia Water Department on how to use and install rain barrels and provides free rain barrels to homeowners who attend workshops. Check the FOW website for information and workshop dates.**

3 Try porous patios and walkways

The large amount of impervious cover in the lower Wissahickon watershed is a significant problem for the creek. Consider reducing the amount of impervious surface on your property with driveways or parking areas built from porous asphalt or special concrete blocks containing holes to allow rainfall to trickle through. Or try a patio made from loose slate with gravel between the rocks.

4 Spout off in new directions

Re-direct your house's downspouts to flow to your lawn or garden. You'll need to slow the stormwater's velocity to protect soil from erosion, but the water can be used where it's needed—on lawn and garden—while reducing your water bill. **See information on dry wells and other infiltration techniques at www.phillyriverinfo.org.**

5 Easy does it

Chemicals we place on our lawns and gardens—weed killer, fertilizer, pesticides—can run into the creek through stormwater. Pesticides can kill stream creatures, and fertilizers stimulate the growth of algae, which blocks the light needed by fish and other creatures. Carefully read all labels containing these materials, and apply them conservatively. Listen to weather reports to refrain from applying just before a storm. Consider less noxious brands of pesticide and weed killer, or take advantage of the wide variety of organic practices available to maintain a chemical-free landscape.

6 Don't get dirty

Strive to keep all lawn, pool, and automotive chemicals—even animal waste from dog walking and soaps and suds from car washing—from tainting the creek. Remember that anything that goes down the storm drain in your street eventually empties into the Wissahickon. Another stream problem is sediment—soil washed into the creek from gardens, sparse lawns and construction sites. Protect soil in every way you can. Cover bare soil with mulch or hay. If your property is sloped, slow the speed of rainfall by covering slopes with vegetation like ground covers, shrubs and trees—or simply mow less often.

7 Less lawn, more garden

Gardens, wooded areas and meadows slow rainfall far better than lawn. Capture more rainfall by replacing portions of lawn in corners and edges with flowerbeds or native shrubs—you will have less lawn to mow as well. Native shrubs and perennials demand less water than ornamentals. Even better, add a rain garden or wildflower meadow to your property. A meadow can dramatically slow the flow of runoff from your property while it absorbs lawn-care chemicals. **FOW can arrange a free “environmental audit” of your property to provide suggestions about environmentally-friendly landscape improvements.**

8 Mow easy, leave some leaves

A close-cropped, well-manicured lawn may look attractive but allows stormwater to flow across it too quickly. Consider maintaining grass at a height of at least four inches—this height slows the growth of weeds while better absorbing stormwater. In addition, refrain from raking autumn’s leaves from every corner and edge of your property. Leave some leaves where they will form natural mulch to soak up stormwater like a sponge.

9 Just a dash

Many homeowners and business people salt roads, driveways and walkways during snowstorms, and much of the salt flows with melted water into the creek. Use salt conservatively and consider using nontoxic alternatives like sand.

10 Get wild and edgy

If you are lucky enough to own property adjacent to the Wissahickon Creek or one of its tributaries, help the creek in an additional way: Instead of mowing your lawn right up to the stream’s edge, allow a vegetative buffer to grow—or plant one yourself. A lush buffer of trees, shrubs and wetland wildflowers protects the stream from your property’s runoff, slowing the flow of rain and reducing the amount of chemicals that enter the creek. Streamside trees and shrubs shade the water, increasing the amount of life-giving oxygen in the water and encouraging clean-stream life. **FOW can assist by talking with you about which materials are best to plant as buffers and can provide free native plant materials for certain properties.**

Many thanks to the Lower Merion Conservancy for granting permission to adapt the material in this brochure.



Get involved!

FOW’s Protect Our Watershed (POW) program offers several other ways you can protect the health of the Wissahickon Creek:

Arrange a free “environmental audit” of your property

FOW’s landscape specialists will evaluate your yard and suggest plantings to improve stormwater absorption and create better wildlife habitat.

Host a neighbor gathering

Experts from FOW and partner organizations can come out to talk with you and your neighbors about runoff, habitat and landscape improvements, and land protection techniques.

Attend a POW lecture, workshop or walk

Go to www.FOW.org for times and locations of programs ranging from floodplain mapping to creating wildflower gardens to testing stream health. Read FOW’s new Land Conservation & Stewardship Plan and look at the “priority” and “high priority” parcel maps that are part of the Plan.

Consider a conservation easement donation

Easements are flexible tools that can permanently protect all or a portion of your property from future inappropriate uses while offering you excellent tax benefits. Contact FOW for more information.

Join FOW as a member

Help preserve our unique Wissahickon Valley by becoming a member of the Friends of the Wissahickon today.

215.247.0417 • www.fow.org

What you do in your backyard affects the health of the Wissahickon Creek!

MEMBERSHIP

Yes. I/we want to help preserve the unique Wissahickon Valley!

(see membership benefits on back)

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