

Parking Strip Gardens

Gardens
Parking Strips

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Wallingford Parking Strip
JLF

Garden space is at a premium in any city. In Seattle, residents are finding ways to use parking strip medians in creative ways. These residual spaces, typically planted up with grass and street trees, are gaining popularity as spaces for ornamental and vegetable gardens. The City of Seattle encourages “beautification of planting strips,” and even publishes recommendations for maintaining safe vehicular sightlines.

On a larger scale, Seattle has installed several Natural Drainage Systems in residential medians. These systems employ networks of weirs, swales, and plantings for the treatment, detention and infiltration of stormwater. Oftentimes, these projects also attempt to calm traffic and improve the pedestrian experience.



"A couple of years ago I found myself altering my dog-walk route to pass by the one house whose garden overflowed out onto the parking strip . . ."

-Valerie Easton

Context



Parking strip gardens have become an increasingly common feature of Seattle's vernacular landscape. Instead of a strip of high-maintenance turf that gets abused by foot traffic, vehicular traffic and dogs, homeowners are reclaiming these small strips as gardens in their own right.



These new gardens tend to fall into one of two categories. Ornamental gardens have emerged in as many styles as there are individuals caring for them. Some improve curb appeal by extending the entry sequence from street to threshold. Others are more naturalistic in appearance, providing a small patch of habitat and requiring less maintenance than traditional alternatives.



The second category involves food production. Some homeowners find that their parking strips are just large enough to accommodate a several small fruit trees. Others build raised planting beds and grow everything from turnips to sunflowers to tomatoes.

In "Residual Space Re-evaluated," Daniel Winterbottom describes the findings of a survey conducted by his students in 1996. His class found that there was a public and social component to people's decisions to plant up their parking medians. In addition to making use of this leftover space, residents enjoyed creating something that others could see and enjoy, and the resulting increase in interaction with neighbors and passersby. Others have observed a domino effect that occurs. When one resident takes the initiative with their own parking strip, others are soon to follow, resulting in an increase in cooperation and interaction among neighbors.



At the municipal scale, Seattle Public Utilities has experimented with developing some streetside right-of-ways into Natural Drainage Systems. These systems create an alternative to traditional sewer and culvert systems, but providing a series of weirs that treat water sedimentation, detain water, and regulate infiltration rates. Carkeek Cascade and Viewlands Cascade, both on residential streets, capture up to 23 and 75 acres of stormwater runoff, respectively.



Essential Elements

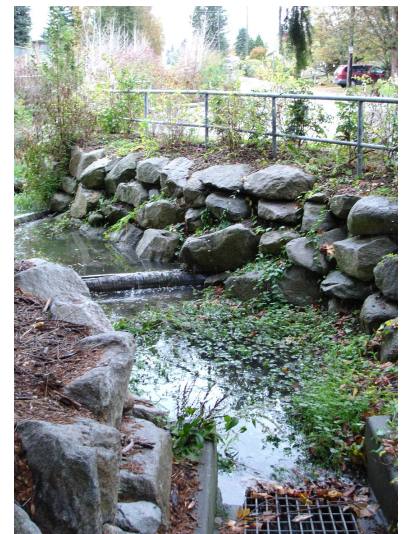
Parking strip gardens have become commonplace enough and provide sufficient public benefit that the Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT) has organized a Street-side Garden Contest for the past several years. Entries are based on:

- effective use of color and foliage
- seasonal interest and appropriate height
- quality of maintenance and plant health; good gardening practices
- uniqueness of design and personality
- plant selection: drought tolerance, pest/disease resistance, absence of invasive species

More officially, however, guidelines for planting strip improvements are outlined by SDOT's Department of Urban Forestry. These outline requirements for sightlines and safety, as well as make provisions for street use permits.

Case: Natural Drainage Systems

SPU's innovative projects with SEA Streets and Cascades are successfully demonstrating alternative strategies to dealing with stormwater runoff. Traditional sewers and culverts move stormwater quickly, carrying surface pollutants into waterways at high speeds. By capturing runoff in SEA Streets and Natural Drainage Systems such as Carkeek Cascade (N.W. 110th Street) and Viewlands Cascade (N.W. 105th Street), sediment and other pollutants can be filtered out before water is detained and then slowly allowed to infiltrate.



Aquisition / Implementation Mechanisms

In majority of cases, parking strip gardens are located in a public right-of-way. Improvement of these strips are usually the result of the initiative of an abutting property owner. It is SDOT's policy to encourage these improvements. While SDOT does have a permitting process for landscape improvements to public right-of-ways, but in practice, these "temporary" uses are often overlooked unless a complaint is registered or a vehicular sight line is obstructed (Winterbottom).

Although right-of-way is not an issue in the case of the SEA Streets and Natural Drainage System projects, the scale of these projects is such that the commitment of resources and the redevelopment of several blocks of residential street needs to occur with a certain degree of professional input and community consensus.

Resources

"Curbside Gardens." Home & Garden Television. http://hgtv.com/hgtv/cda/article_print/0,1983,HGTV_3566_2224953_ARTICLE-DETAIL-PRINT,00.html

"Planting Strip Landscaping and Paving." Seattle Department of Transportation. <http://www.seattle.gov/transportation/plantingstrip.htm>

"SDOT - Tour Seattle's 2004 Streetside Garden Contest Sites!" <http://www.ci.seattle.wa.us/transportation/streetsidedevote04.htm>

"Stormwater Facilities Project List." www.gaynorinc.com

"Street Edge Alternatives Project." Seattle Public Utilities. http://www.ci.seattle.wa.us/util/About_SPU/Drainage_&_Sewer_System/Natural_Drainage_Systems/Street_Edge_Alternatives/index.asp

Winterbottom, Daniel. "Residual Space Re-evaluated." *Places*, 13:3, pp. 40-47.