

N-16

Neighborhood Source Area: Rooftop

DOWNSPOUT DISCONNECTION



Description

Downspout disconnection spreads rooftop runoff from individual downspouts across the lawn or yard where it filters or infiltrates into the ground. While some disconnections are simple, most require the installation of an on-site storm water retrofit practice. These simple practices capture, store and infiltrate storm water runoff from residential lots, and include rain barrels, rain gardens, French drains or dry wells. *Rain barrels* capture runoff from rooftops and are typically installed on individual roof leaders. Runoff captured in the barrel is stored for later use as supplemental irrigation. *Rain gardens* are shallow, landscaped depressions in the yard used to store and infiltrate runoff from rooftops and other impervious surfaces on the lot. *French drains and dry wells* are shallow small stone trenches used to infiltrate rooftop runoff into the ground, where soils are permeable. More details about on-site retrofit practices can be found in Profile Sheets OS-15 through OS-17 in Manual 3.

The ideal watershed behavior is to disconnect all downspouts so individual rooftops deliver no runoff to the storm drain system or stream. The negative watershed behavior is to pipe downspouts across the yard and into the curb or street in order to promote positive drainage (Figure 1).

How Downspout Disconnection Influences Subwatershed Quality

Downspout disconnection reduces the amount of impervious cover on a developed lot that can generate stormwater runoff. In addition to reducing the volume of runoff, downspout disconnection promotes groundwater recharge, reduces storm water runoff volumes, and filters out pollutants through the lawn soil. Since each individual retrofit for downspout disconnection treats only a few hundred or thousand square

feet of impervious cover, dozens or hundreds are needed to make a measurable difference at the subwatershed level. Consequently, an intensive campaign to target education, technical assistance, and financial resources within a neighborhood or subwatershed to encourage widespread adoption of disconnection is needed.

Percentage of Residents Engaging in Downspout Disconnection

Data is not currently available to estimate the rate at which homeowners voluntarily disconnect downspouts. The frequency of this behavior is thought to be extremely low in most neighborhoods unless a community aggressively promotes and subsidizes disconnections. If this occurs, homeowner participation rates of 20 to 30% have been reported in pilot projects (Environment Canada, 2001).



Figure 1: Downspout Intentionally Bypassing Landscaped Area and Draining onto Driveway

Variation in Downspout Disconnection

The potential to disconnect downspouts is normally evaluated as part of the Neighborhood Source Assessment component of the USSR survey (see Manual 11). The most important neighborhood factor is the proportion of existing homes directly connected to the storm drain system. Negative neighborhood factors include the presence of basements, compacted soils, and poor neighborhood awareness or involvement. Positive factors are large rooftop areas that are directly connected to the storm drain system, lots with extensive tree canopy, and good neighborhood housekeeping. In general, large residential lots are most suitable for most disconnection retrofits (1/4 acre lots and larger), although rain barrels can be used on lots as small as 4,000 square feet (Figure 2).

To date, the impetus for most disconnection retrofit programs has been to separate residential storm water from sewer flows in older neighborhoods in order to minimize basement sewer backups or combined sewer overflows.



Figure 2: Rain Barrel Used on a Back, Second Floor Balcony

Techniques to Promote Downspout Disconnection

Communities are experimenting with many different carrots to promote disconnection retrofits, including:

- Conventional outreach materials (flyers, brochures, posters)
- Free or discounted rain barrel distribution
- Municipal or schoolyard demonstration projects
- Credits or subsidies for disconnection retrofits
- Direct technical assistance
- Provision of discounted mulch, piping or plant materials
- Modification of sewer and storm water ordinances to promote disconnection
- Mandatory disconnection for targeted subwatersheds

Good Examples

Downspout Disconnection Program (Portland, OR). The City offers residents a credit of \$53 per disconnection in the form of a check or a one-time lump sum credit toward their sewer bill after inspection and approval of the work. In addition, neighborhood associations and other civic groups (churches, schools, etc.) can earn \$13 for every downspout they disconnect. <http://www.portlandonline.com/bes/index.cfm?c=32144>

Rain Blocker Program (City of Chicago). The Rain Blocker pilot program is specifically designed to eliminate or greatly reduce the amount of basement flooding caused by sewer surcharge. The program works by restricting the rate of storm water flow into the city sewer system, via installing vortex restrictors within the catch basins of city streets and through downspout disconnection from buildings. <http://www.cityofchicago.org/WaterManagement/blocker.html>

Neighborhood Rain Gardens (Minneapolis, MN). This program works with neighborhood associations to encourage landscaping for rainwater management. The Fulton Neighborhood Association has worked with eight homeowners to install rain gardens, rain barrels, gutter downspout redirection, and infiltration systems that reduce runoff delivered from individual properties to streets, alleys and sidewalks.

<http://www.fultonneighborhood.org/lfrwm.htm>

Top Resources

How to Disconnect Your Downspouts (Portland Oregon)

<http://www.portlandonline.com/bes/index.cfm?c=32144>

Milwaukee Downspout Disconnection Program

<http://www.mmsd.com/projects/downspout.cfm>

Boston Water and Sewer Commission's Downspout Disconnection Program

http://www.bwsc.org/Customer_Service/Programs/downspout.htm

RainGardens.org

<http://www.raingardens.org/>

Rain Gardens: A how-to manual for homeowners

<http://www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/water/wm/dsfm/sfore/documents/rgmanual.pdf>

Rain Garden Applications and Simple Calculations

http://www.cwp.org/Community_Watersheds/Rain_Garden.htm

How to Build and Install a Rain Barrel

http://www.cwp.org/Community_Watersheds/brochure.pdf

Skills for Protecting Your Stream: Retrofitting Your Own Backyard

http://www.cwp.org/Community_Watersheds/Retrofitting_Backyard.pdf