

**Planting the Seeds of Community Involvement:
Black & Veatch's Rain Garden Initiative**

Constance Ward

*Director of Global Communications
Black & Veatch's Global Water Business*

Nearly three quarters of the respondents in Black & Veatch's 2007 *National Stormwater Utility Survey* believe an organized public information/education effort is essential to the success of a user-fee funded stormwater utility. The importance of public education and communication in changing our mental models is confirmed by this recent survey of 71 utilities, serving populations ranging from 12,000 to 3.9 million throughout 22 states.¹

In line with these findings, Black & Veatch has adopted an innovative approach to improving community involvement in stormwater issues and fostering sustainable behaviors at work and at home, in the schools and in the community.

In April 2006, Black & Veatch launched an extensive Rain Garden initiative in conjunction with the 10,000 Rain Gardens program in Kansas City, Mo., which was sponsored by then-Mayor Kay Barnes. As one of its key initiatives, Black & Veatch planted Kansas City's first Corporate Rain Garden at the Kansas City headquarters of its global water business. A large-scale event for the rain garden groundbreaking drew the attention of civic leaders, the media, the company's employees and even local neighbors.

A rain garden is a shallow basin that captures polluted stormwater run-off from downspouts or driveways. Rain gardens feature deep-rooted native plants that will draw down the water and cleanse it of pollutants naturally. Instead of water running into overburdened sewers during typical storms and flowing untreated into the streams of the watershed, the water becomes a benefit to the gardener who appreciates the butterflies and birds that frequent the colorful plants after the storm has passed.

As Dan McCarthy, President and CEO of Black & Veatch's global water business, points out, this is a non-structural solution to stormwater runoff that the company is promoting in addition to structural solutions.

Black & Veatch's extensive global projects are designed to improve the quality of life in communities. One of those projects was to develop a comprehensive stormwater management plan for Kansas City. Public input led to development of a truly innovative program launched by Barnes, Kansas City's first woman mayor, who encouraged citizens to voluntarily tackle stormwater management in their own backyards by building rain gardens...10,000 of them.

Black & Veatch was involved in community outreach activities that communicated the multiple, complex objectives of the environmental program to elected officials and the public. McCarthy took the lead in the corporate arena, issuing a "Call to Action" for local companies to plant their own seeds of community involvement by launching rain garden programs. He published an opinion column in the local paper and presented the program to the Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce in order to promote the environmental initiative among local businesses.

Hallmark Cards was the first organization to pick up the gauntlet and plant a corporate rain garden at their international headquarters several miles away from the Black & Veatch facility. Hallmark actually use recycled mulch from their cafeteria waste to fertilize their rain garden.

The Black & Veatch employee involvement approach has been important to its rain garden success. The engineering giant created a B&V Rain Garden Brigade educational program with a wide range of initiatives for 2006 and 2007:

- Volunteer participation in the groundbreaking, planting and first "birthday" celebration of Phase I of the three-phase corporate rain garden
- Starter plants for B&V Rain Garden Brigade members
- \$50 gift certificates for native plants at a local nursery to be donated to B&V Rain Garden Brigade members' children who attended schools that were starting a rain garden
- Educational brochures and materials available upon request for all local schools
- Additional financial and consulting support for some non-profit organizations wanting to build a rain garden
- A Rain Garden Brigade newsletter on rain garden topics and other environmental issues

- Distributing “Rain Gardens in a Bag” with a label to suggest that recipients try to plant seeds of community involvement in their own neighborhoods

Along with Hallmark, Black & Veatch also sponsored a program that helped disadvantaged youth working as summer interns for the Missouri Department of Conservation to learn more about rain gardens, the water cycle and current water and wastewater issues. The six students who completed the “Learn-In” sessions received \$500 scholarships for college at the end of the summer, during which they planted several rain gardens in the inner city.

During these lessons several Black & Veatch engineers presented educational materials to help train these budding scientists. Later in the year, these young engineers gave another rain garden presentation to a classroom of inner-city students who were starting their own rain garden at the school. The presenters used their personal passion and energy to instill in those at-risk students an interest in the water industry as a whole.

Another community outreach activity took place at the US Conference of Mayors conference in Las Vegas. Although it was a bit challenging to “talk rain gardens” in the middle of the desert, Black & Veatch sponsored a rain garden breakfast for 200 mayors, where McCarthy discussed the community benefits of raising awareness of stormwater issues in such an innovative, attractive way.

Since the launch of the rain garden program, local, national and international media have covered the positive aspects of the Black & Veatch environmental initiative; and a website www.bvraingardens.com keeps the public updated on latest developments.

In summary, the rain garden initiative has been hailed as a grassroots campaign that has taken the community by storm(water) and has raised awareness of important water industry issues and the impact that individuals can have on solving environmental problems.

¹The 2007 *National Stormwater Utility Survey* was published November 13, 2007, by Black & Veatch’s management consulting division, Enterprise Management Solutions.