



## Blue Thumb Party

### Activity Guide

Visit

**[www.BlueThumb.org](http://www.BlueThumb.org)**

*for how-to's, blueprints,  
retailers and more.*





This activity guide was created by the East Metro Water Resource Education Program. The mission of the East Metro Water Resource Education Program is to improve the quality of surface and groundwater resources in Washington County through education and outreach about non-point source water pollution.

Members of EMWREP include Brown's Creek, Carnelian Marine - St. Croix, Comfort Lake - Forest Lake, Ramsey-Washington Metro, Rice Creek, South Washington, and Valley Branch Watershed Districts, Middle St. Croix Watershed Management Organization, the communities of Cottage Grove, Dellwood, Forest Lake, Lake Elmo, Stillwater, West Lakeland and Willernie, Washington County and the Washington Conservation District.

Learn more at [www.mnwcd.org/cleanwater](http://www.mnwcd.org/cleanwater).

Thank you for volunteering to host or lead a Blue Thumb Party!

A Blue Thumb Party is a fun and engaging way to educate neighbors and friends about local water resource issues and involve them in efforts to prevent water pollution by planting native gardens, raingardens and shoreline plantings.

The Blue Thumb program makes it easy for people to find information and resources with an easy-to-use website at [www.BlueThumb.org](http://www.BlueThumb.org). On the website, people can find planting guides, upcoming workshops, links to local retailers and funding assistance. Several conservation districts, watershed districts and cities in the Twin Cities metro area offer mini-grants for homeowners to install Blue Thumb plantings on their properties. Many also offer free home site visits and design assistance.

The goal of a Blue Thumb Party is to introduce people to the Blue Thumb - Planting for Clean Water program and actively involve them in planting native gardens, raingardens and shoreline plantings in their neighborhoods.

To reserve a Blue Thumb Party kit, please contact Angie Hong at 651-275-1136 x.35 or [angie.hong@mnwcd.org](mailto:angie.hong@mnwcd.org).

## Step 1: Preparing for the Party

Once you have decided on a date for the party, you can deliver invitations to neighbors and friends. If you don't know some of your neighbors, this is a great opportunity to meet them. Stop by while they are out in the yard or try visiting on the weekend. People are always more likely to come if you invite them in person than if you simply leave the invite at their house. It is illegal to place invites or flyers directly into mailboxes.

Pick up a Blue Thumb Party Kit and look over the activities for the party. You will also want to call your local watershed district or conservation district to get aerial photos of the host's house and neighborhood.

Contact Angie Hong (651-275-1136 x.35 or [angie.hong@mnwcd.org](mailto:angie.hong@mnwcd.org) for photos in Washington County).

Take time to assemble information packets for the guests using handouts from your local Blue Thumb partners. These packets should include information about local grants and assistance, announcements for upcoming workshops and the "40 Native Plants Guide," along with any other materials that may be useful.

## Step 6: Spread the Word!

Little more than a year after the Blue Thumb Program began, it had already grown from an idea to a dynamic partnership of 44 nurseries, watersheds, cities and non-profit organizations working together to improve our water resources with beautiful plantings.

In April of 2007, about 25 people visited the [www.BlueThumb.org](http://www.BlueThumb.org) website each day. By April of 2008, 83 people a day were visiting the website - that's more than three times as many people learning about native gardens, raingardens and shoreline plantings.

In addition to hosting a party for your neighbors, you can help spread the word about the program by talking to your friends and family, staffing a booth at a community event or volunteering to speak to a local community group.

If you are interested in helping out with Blue Thumb outreach in Washington County, contact Angie Hong at 651-275-1136 x.35 or [angie.hong@mnwcd.org](mailto:angie.hong@mnwcd.org).

THANK YOU!

## Step 5: Seal the Deal

Before the end of the party, be sure to give all of your party guests information packets to take home. Take time to answer any questions and run through the contents of the packets. Direct party guests to resources for further information, such as the [www.BlueThumb.org](http://www.BlueThumb.org) website. Assign people their homework to schedule a site visit through the conservation district or watershed district or make a map of their own property to start a Blue Thumb project. If you have copies of the Blue Thumb Guide to Raingardens, you can sell them to those who are interested.

If possible, follow-up with people two to three weeks later to find out if they are planning any projects for their homes.

For any Washington County resident interested in scheduling a site visit, please pass their contact information to Angie Hong at 651-275-1136 x.35 or [angie.hong@mnwcd.org](mailto:angie.hong@mnwcd.org).

## Step 2: Creating a Festive Atmosphere

Blue Thumb Parties are successful when they are fun! Some people may come to the party because they are interested in learning about the program, but many will come just to meet their neighbors, enjoy a summer afternoon or spend time with friends. If they wanted a formal lesson on stormwater management or landscape ecology, they would take a course at a local college.

You can help to create a festive atmosphere by serving refreshments. and creating a comfortable seating area where your guests can congregate. Depending on your style, you might want to serve coffee and dessert, chips and salsa with margaritas, or even beer and hot dogs. Remember, food and drinks make people happy.

### Step 3: Key Points

This guide includes several fun activities for a Blue Thumb neighborhood party. Depending on the group, your comfort level and the amount of time you have, you can use a few or all of the activities. It is important, however, to communicate these three points to the guests:

- 1) What you do in your yard impacts local lakes, rivers and even groundwater.
- 2) The Blue Thumb Program helps people to create native plantings, raingardens and shoreline plantings that are beautiful and easy to maintain and help to keep our water clean.
- 3) Creating Blue Thumb plantings is easy! Resources are available to help you plan, design, install and maintain your gardens.

### Fabulous Flowers

**Materials needed:** Flower pictures, BINGO cards, pens and pencils, prizes

Native plants are not only good for your yard but they are also beautiful. Show pictures of native flowers and grasses and describe some of their benefits, such as attracting birds and butterflies. After you have shown the group pictures, play native plant BINGO and award gift certificates to a local Blue Thumb nursery or other prizes to the winners.

### Yard and Garden Tour

**Materials needed:** None

If the weather permits, you can walk outside to tour the host's yard. This is a great option if there is a Blue Thumb planting to see or can be an opportunity to point out ideal locations for future projects.

source pollution, such as stormwater runoff. The good news is that people can make simple changes in their homes and yards to limit their impacts on local water resources. Good housekeeping practices include limiting use of fertilizer and pesticides, disposing of wastes correctly, keeping leaves and grass out of the streets, limiting use of irrigation and planting trees and native plants.

Native plants are so effective because their root systems can be 2 to 15 feet deep. Turf grass, on the other hand, has roots only 2 to 3 inches deep. The deep roots of native plants hold soil in place, limiting erosion and runoff, filtering pollutants and increasing infiltration. Use the pictures of native plants with roots (strings) to illustrate the comparative root depths for several common plants. Even people who have mostly turf in their yards can help by mowing the grass high (3-4 inches). Planting native flowers, grasses and shrubs is even better.

### Demo Yard

**Materials needed:** Laminated photo of demo yard, cut-outs

Planning your landscape is easier than it looks. Use the aerial photo of the demo home to demonstrate how residents can map their properties. Hand out laminated cut-outs of raingardens, rain barrels, porous pavement and native gardens to people in the group and ask them to place them on the demo home site in places where they think they would be appropriate.

### Step 4: Choose your activities:

Materials for most of these activities are available in the Blue Thumb party kit. For aerial photos of the host's yard and neighborhood, contact your local watershed district or conservation district.

### Opening

**Materials needed:** Sign-in sheet, name tags, garden pictures

Begin by asking everyone to introduce themselves and sign-in. Ask them to tell how long they have lived in their neighborhood, describe their personal style of landscaping and any goals they may have for their yards. If there is a lake, river or stream nearby, also ask them to explain what role the water body plays in their life.

Briefly describe the Blue Thumb – Planting for Clean Water program and show pretty pictures of native gardens, raingardens and shoreline plantings.

### Know your watershed

**Materials needed:** Aerial photos of house and neighborhood, watershed or county map

Use aerial photos of the host's home and the neighborhood to describe how a watershed functions. Begin with a raindrop

falling on the roof, and trace its route through the yard and neighborhood. Briefly define stormwater pollution. Using maps, you can show people how stormwater in their neighborhood travels to local lakes or rivers. You may also want to point out any impaired water bodies and locations of recent restoration projects.

### Would you drink this water?

#### Materials needed: Blindfold, water samples

Many pollutants can impact our water resources, but some of the most common in the Twin Cities metro area include phosphorus, sediment and mercury. Some of these pollutants have obvious impacts. Phosphorus, for example, increases algal growth, which can lead to smelly green water, algal blooms and fish kills. Others, such as mercury, are odorless and tasteless but can impact human and ecological health. This short activity is designed to help illustrate the impacts of water pollution.

Ask for a volunteer to test four samples of water. The person will be blindfolded and must determine by smell alone which of the four jars of water is safe to drink.

After the volunteer and the rest of the guests have made their guesses, reveal the “safe” sample and the sources of pollution in the other samples.

Jar #1 is “contaminated” with green food coloring, which represents excess phosphorus. Although Minnesota has a phosphorus-free fertilizer law, grass clippings, leaves and other

yard waste as well as sand and sediment all contribute phosphorus to our local water bodies. With excess phosphorus comes excess algae, sometimes even causing algal blooms and massive fish kills. People can help out by sweeping yard waste out of the street and controlling erosion on their properties.

Jar #2 is clean water from the faucet and safe to drink.

Jar #3 is “contaminated” with almond extract, which represents toxic chemicals that we may not be able to see in our water. When we go to a swimming pool, we can smell the chlorine and we know that it is not safe to drink the water. Some chemicals like mercury, however, are odorless and colorless. We might not realize it’s in our local lakes, but if they are impaired by mercury, it may be unsafe to eat fish from them very often.

Jar #4 is “contaminated” by salt. You might notice a slightly musty odor or a slight cloudiness in the water. It takes only 1 teaspoon of salt to contaminate five gallons of water, making it unlivable for fish and other aquatic animals. Salt can contaminate our surface water and groundwater resources when it is washed off of city streets during the winter.

### Radical Roots

#### Materials needed: Plant photos with roots

In the 1960’s and 1970’s, Americans made strides in improving water quality by controlling point sources of water pollution like factory pipes. Now, our next challenge is to control non-point