Residents in the Dixon Hill area of Mount Washington still scratch their heads that the 1900 block of Fairbank Avenue was developed without storm drains in the 1960s.

"This side of Fairbank is like Venice," said resident Paul Levine, only half-joking. "In a big rain, it's like a river."

There is nothing to stop stormwater from running downhill, feeding sediment and pollutants into the Western Run, the Jones Falls and the Chesapeake Bay.

Nothing, that is, except an elaborate, 4,000-square-foot "rain garden" that a crew of more than 20 volunteers from the neighborhood just built over the first weekend of spring and the weekend before that.

Led by Levine, a renovation contractor, volunteers have spent nearly 100 man-hours each weekend moving dirt and mulch, pulling invasive plants and weeds, and leveling a plot of hilly ground into a graded plateau, designed to act as a catch basin and garden, known as a bio-retention area.

Kimberly Brodie-Hopkins, who lives at 2001 Fairbank, allowed some of her yard to be used for the project.

Now mostly done and ready for planting, the garden -- located near a footbridge and...
Volunteers in the Dixon Hill area spent the past two weekends building the demonstration garden. A smaller rain garden is planned at Mount Washington Elementary School.

Residents have also laid a deep bed of stones from a nearby storm drain outlet to the rain garden to cleanse stormwater and slow its velocity.

"By the end of this weekend, we'll have moved 300 wheelbarrow loads of topsoil, 15 cubic yards of mulch and 4 1/2 tons of stone," Levine said last week.

The Dixon Hill rain garden is one of two that are being built in Mount Washington in an effort to reduce and redirect stormwater runoff, which residents said erodes the banks of the Western Run, pollutes area waterways and contributes to flooding.

Even with more storm drains, runoff would be a problem in the Dixon Hill area, Levine said. A lack of storm drains exacerbated the problem, he said.

The garden -- and a smaller one planned at Mount Washington Elementary School -- are being funded with a grant of $4,000 from the Chesapeake Bay Trust to the Mount Washington Preservation Trust.

The Mount Washington Preservation Trust is not directly involved in the project but is serving as the official funding recipient on behalf of residents, as a legally incorporated nonprofit.

The local trust is glad to help.

"We're happy about trying to keep the runoff from getting into the Western Run," President Lynn Strott said.

On Sunday, the site was a bustle of wheelbarrows and shovels with a vinegar-like odor emanating from a large mound of mulch. Brodie-Hopkins' son, Matthew, was among the volunteers shoveling. An amelanchier tree sat on the site, ready for planting.

An information table showed a diagram of what is called a demonstration rain garden, because the goal is partly to teach other Mount Washingtonians to make their own rain gardens at home.

Also on the information table was a book about perennials, a how-to guide for making rain gardens and a sign-up sheet.

"We're doing a little fundraising," said Kroft, who helped write the grant. She said the grant will cover most, but not all, of the expected $6,000 to $7,000 in total costs.

A 1,000-square-foot garden is expected to be built early next month near the Mount Washington Elementary School playground to reduce runoff on the school playground in the hilly 1800 block of Sulgrave Avenue. The garden is envisioned as a teaching tool for students learning about the environment, Kroft said.

Residents are also applying to the Parks and People Foundation for a grant to make a marshy, bog-like rain garden in the area, Kroft said.

And there's an unrelated project to start a community vegetable garden in Northwest Park, at Rogers Avenue and Wexford Road in Mount Washington, residents said.

Right man for the job

Levine, 61, said he became interested in rain gardens because of his concern about a lot of sediment, roots and debris getting into the Western Run. He suggested the idea of a community rain garden to Mike Sherlock, who is well-known as a gardening guru in Mount Washington and head of the Mount Washington Arboretum.

Levine said Sherlock pointed him toward the Chesapeake Bay Trust and its mini-grant program.

Sherlock is now a volunteer in the rain garden project.

Levine said the rain garden is "a natural project for the trust to get involved in," and that he, as a renovation contractor by profession, is the right man to lead the project.

"I have knowledge of building stuff," he said. "I know how to grade."