It's all about plants
Healthy riparian areas include a variety of types and ages of plants, including trees, shrubs, grasses, and other groundcovers. Plants adapt to local rainfall, climate, insects, and soil conditions tend to be easier to care for because they need less water and pesticides.

Most native plants are well adapted to their region. In the driest regions of the inland Pacific Northwest, a few of the common native riparian plants are:

- Black cottonwood
- Bunchgrass
- Coyote and sandbar willows
- Golden currant
- Tufted hairgrass
- Lupine
- Ponderosa pine
- Quaking aspen
- Red-osier dogwood
- Snowberry
- Woods' rose

Streamside plants help stabilize streambanks, moderate stream temperatures, and provide habitat for fish and other wildlife.

Healthy riparian areas:
- Reduce the chance of flooding
- Improve water quality
- Provide habitat for fish and wildlife

Why do riparian areas matter?
Plants in healthy riparian areas:
- Provide wood to streams, creating fish habitat and slowing the stream current after storms.
- Provide important food sources, homes, shelter, and travel corridors for wildlife, fish, and other aquatic organisms.
- Filter out pollutants, such as fertilizers, pesticides, and animal wastes.
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- Improve water quality
- Reduce the chance of flooding

The bottom line is:
- Less flooding during and immediately after storms
- More water in the stream during summer
- Cleaner water
- Homes and food for wildlife, including many species of fish, insects, amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals

As a homeowner in the Pacific Northwest, you have a unique opportunity to help maintain or improve the health of streams and riparian areas. A riparian area is the area of land adjacent to a stream, lake, or wetland. Most healthy, natural riparian areas have moist, fertile soils that support many types of moisture-loving plants. These plants provide food and shelter to numerous fish and wildlife.
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What Can You Do?

How do people change riparian areas?

Removing or damaging plants through construction and landscaping, especially in the riparian area, can harm streams. Plants, particularly trees and shrubs, catch rainfall and allow it to soak slowly into the ground instead of running quickly into streams. When water runoff from storms reaches streams too quickly, more erosion and flooding occur downstream. More rain-water, pesticides, fertilizers, and soil reach the stream in areas without riparian plants to slow and filter water. When streams and riparian areas are not healthy, people feel the consequences.

• Recreational areas are lost or degraded.
• Fish and wildlife decline, reducing opportunities for hunting, fishing, and wildlife viewing.
• Increased flooding may cause erosion and property damage.
• The region may lose economic opportunities because people avoid unattractive and unhealthy areas.

Be aware of ways you can reduce the amount of water flowing downhill from your property.

Take care of plants and the streamside

• Promote dense vegetation to reduce runoff and trap contaminants.
• Learn about native plants and use them where appropriate.
• Restore eroded streambanks with help from a professional.
• Leave wood and other natural materials in streams.
• Don’t straighten channels or place rubble or rip-rap on streambanks.
• Use a small switchback trail to reduce erosion in steep areas.

Grow and maintain a stream-friendly garden and lawn

• Plant native plants—they can be easier to care for because they often are more tolerant of insects and low summer rainfall.
• Minimize the use of pesticides and synthetic fertilizers. Consider using natural, slow-release fertilizers.
• Locate compost piles on flat surfaces away from streams or drainage areas, and keep them covered during the wet winter months. Do not dispose of grass clippings near streams.
• Apply compost to gardens only during the growing season.

Teach your children what is healthy and unhealthy for streams and riparian areas.
Make caring for the stream a family project.

Be careful when you build

• Leave as many native plants as possible near streams and everywhere!
• Plan new construction away from existing streams and wetlands instead of modifying them.
• Minimize paved areas. Keep the roof area, walkways, and driveways as small as possible, and direct runoff to landscaping or another filtering system where possible.
• Use gravel or bark instead of pavement for paths and driveways.
• Always observe local ordinances and get proper permits.
• Leave as wide a vegetation buffer as possible next to the stream.

There’s more you can do around the house

• Don’t pour soapy water, automobile oil, paint, household chemicals, or pesticides down storm drains. Drains often are connected directly to streams.
• Direct gutters away from streams, pavement, and septic drain fields, and into areas where water can seep slowly into the soil.
• Inspect your septic system annually, and pump the tank as necessary.
• Keep pet waste away from streams, riparian areas, and paved areas. Put pet waste in a bag and place it in the trash.
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Archival Copy. For current information, see the OSU Extension Catalog: https://catalog.extension.oregonstate.edu
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Taking Care of Streams in Eastern Washington, Eastern Oregon, and Idaho

A Homeowner’s Guide to Riparian Areas

For more information
EPA literature review on low impact development techniques
http://www.epa.gov/wetlands/lidlit.html

http://www.epa.gov/owow/nps/lidlit.html

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Why do riparian areas matter?

Plants in healthy riparian areas:
- Provide wood to streams, creating fish habitat and slowing the stream current after storms.
- Shade streams in summer. Cool water is healthier for many native fish species.
- Help prevent erosion by holding soil in place with their roots.
- Filter sediment out of muddy runoff, keeping it from smothering fish habitat.
- Allow rain to soak into the soil instead of running immediately into the stream. This reduces flooding and allows water to be released slowly to the stream during the dry season.
- Filter out pollutants, such as fertilizers, pesticides, and animal wastes.
- Provide important food sources, homes, shelter, and travel corridors for wildlife, fish, and other aquatic organisms.

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