

# HOME

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Remaining

# Slow it. Flow it. Grow it.

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Posted: Sunday, April 3, 2016 6:00 am

Nate Downey/For The New Mexican

Landownership comes with responsibilities. Sometimes it involves a snow shovel. Other times it's weeds. As much as we love them, land titles mean mending walls, raking leaves, and mowing grass. Here in New Mexico, we are lucky not to have to worry much about the latter. Turf installation and maintenance is not only avoided statewide, but it's also often scoffed at on private property. In public parks, plastic playing fields are slowly taking over real-grass ones.

A few years ago, I was visiting with a friend who'd moved to Ohio after a decade in

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the City Different. One eerie surprise, he said, “was the incessant sound of lawn mowers.” From dawn until dusk, his suburb pattered, buzzed, and moaned. The idea of quiet was an unattainable dream and, by virtue of its absence, a nightmarish symbol of pollution. In the midst of all the important talk about Flint, Michigan, let’s not forget that runoff from so many chemically treated lawns in the Great Lakes region has produced enormous algal blooms that often poison public and private water systems.

Interestingly, the low maintenance, turf-free properties of Northern New Mexico come with a pollution-creating flipside, too. It’s called soil erosion. In a land of brittle ground, every roof, patio, driveway, and road is a surface that will damage the land if left unmanaged. Without thoughtful implementation of highly localized best management practices, developed real estate creates serious pollution. In a pre-development state, vegetation will absorb a significant quantity of rainwater before generating runoff. In a post-development state, compacted land and impervious surfaces deliver runoff with a significantly larger water volume, an unnaturally high rate of speed, and containing increased levels of particulate. Soon, visible quantities of soil erode, and this causes further scouring downslope. Inevitably, what was called useful soil becomes unwanted sediment in waters that suffer from turbidity, wildlife-habitat destruction, aquifer-infiltration challenges, and other problems.

It’s a viciously viscous cycle of increasingly gunky waters started by gouged-out mesa-tops. At many points along the route followed by our rainwater and stormwater, there are chances to use my three-step motto: Slow it. Flow it. Grow it. First, you slow stormwater down. Next, you flow it toward the roots of plant material. Finally, you grow that water into biomass that retains and builds soil.

The ways to follow this plan are endless. If you’re a self-starter and an effective reader of textbooks, you might want to look into the American Rainwater Catchment Systems Association’s new 300-page textbook, *Rainwater Harvesting Manual*. You’ll find that the first of two chapters by yours truly focuses on the



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“slow it, flow it, grow it” theme.

If you’d like instant gratification, feel free to visit [www.permadesign.com](http://www.permadesign.com). There, you can schedule a landscape consultation, watch a how-to video about straw-book swales, or review my recently completed archive of this column.

The stormwater that sweeps through our land can be a blessing. It just depends on whether or not we go beyond snow-shoveling, weeding, and even responsibilities as basic as our bills. We also need to take seriously our responsibility to heal our challenged soils.

*Nate Downey, the author of Harvest the Rain, has been a local landscape consultant, designer, and contractor since 1992. He can be reached at 505-690-7939 or via [www.permadesign.com](http://www.permadesign.com).*

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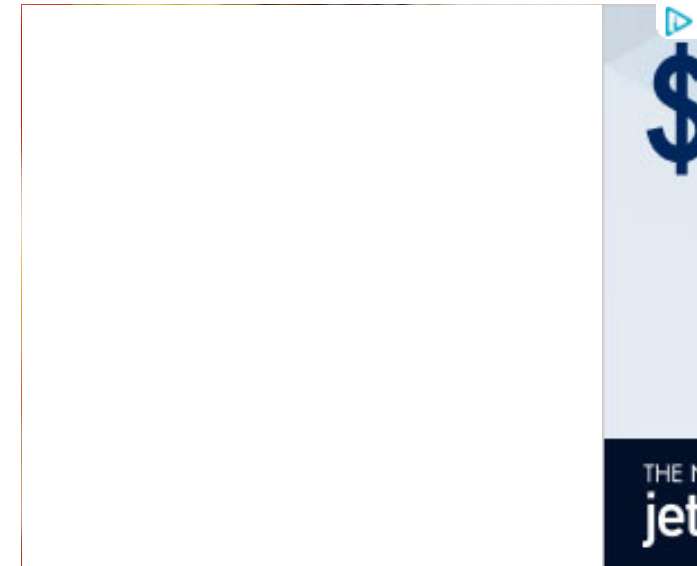
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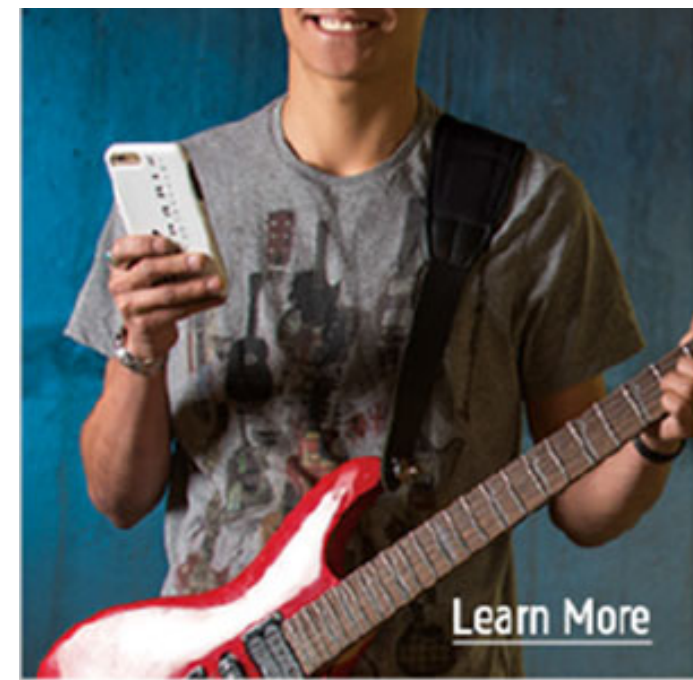
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