

# HEALTHY STREAMS & RIPARIAN ZONES

Kentucky Division of Water

## What Are Riparian Zones?

The area of vegetation near streams is known as the riparian zone (from the Latin ripa for river bank). These areas are ecologically diverse and contribute to the health of other aquatic ecosystems by filtering out pollutants from stormwater runoff and preventing erosion. They are attractive additions to residential neighborhoods, and as well as critical habitat for many native animals.



## Importance of Riparian Vegetation

*Plants along a stream have multiple jobs:*

- Help maintain cool water temperatures through provision of shade and creation of a cool and humid microclimate over the stream.
- Provide food resources and habitat structure for aquatic ecosystems.
- Stabilize soils by vegetation rooting on banks and floodplains.
- Filter chemicals and nutrients that runoff from neighboring yards and landscapes.
- Filter sediment in stormwater carried from construction sites, freshly tilled gardens, fields, and bare slopes.
- Moderate downstream flooding.
- Slow water down and allow it to soak into the soil.
- Provide natural environment for recreation, such as fishing, canoeing, hiking, and bird watching.



## Healthy Riparian Zones

A healthy riparian zone helps improve stream water quality, and property owners can help make sure that their riparian zones are in good shape by following some simple Best Management Practices.

- **Fence livestock away from your creek.** Livestock overgraze and trample riparian vegetation to get to the water which can lead to excessive erosion of the stream bank and loss of riparian zone benefits.
  - **Try an alternative water source.** If you want to keep livestock away from the creek without fencing you can give them an alternative water sources to draw them away from the creek side.
  - **Create a “No Mow” zone.** By simply deciding not to mow directly up to the water’s edge and allowing a buffer strip of native plants to grow up is the ultimate low effort method to improve stream health.
  - **Remove nonnative species.** Nonnative species like bush honeysuckle outcompete native plants, often taking over an area without providing the habitat and food value that a native plant would provide. This leads to a less diverse, and ultimately less stable ecosystem.
  - **Plant bare areas with native plants.** If you are starting with a creek with no riparian vegetation, you can work with local nurseries to plant native plant species that will become your healthy riparian zone. This will improve habitat for native wildlife as well as creating a resilient community well prepared to deal with the variation in our Kentucky climate.
  - **Organize a community planting event.** If you have riparian zones in need if some TLC, make contact with your local watershed groups to put together a community planting event to help enhance stream health overall in your watershed.
  - **Contact your local UK Extension Office.** The University of Kentucky Extension can be a valuable resource for learning about how to care for and repair your riparian zone.
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