

Rain Barrels: An Old Idea Made New Again

Rain barrels help conserve water and make your plants happier.

Residential irrigation can account for 40% of at-home water consumption in a city. This can be a problem, particularly in summer when water shortages are most likely as the majority of outdoor water use occurs. Capturing rainwater from your roof top is a smart way to lower your water bill, help lakes, streams and rivers and lessen pressure on municipal water supplies.

A rain barrel or cistern is collects rain from your rooftop. The rain barrel is positioned under the downspout of a building to collect the rain that falls on that building's roof to be used later for lawn and garden watering or washing cars or windows—activities that would normally use tap water.

Why use a rain barrel?

- Rain barrels help decrease groundwater demand during the hot summer months, which means less water needs to be pumped, treated to drinking water standards and then pumped to households. Less pumping also means less electricity (for pumping) is used during critical summer periods. And, of course, saves you money on your water bill.
- Rain water is "soft" water, free of chlorine, fluoride, lime and calcium. Plants prefer the pH of rain water.
- Municipalities save on operating costs when less water is used, and in the long run it saves a great deal on infrastructure costs as this translates to fewer new wells, pumping stations and treatment facilities need to be built.
- Just one quarter inch of rainfall runoff from the average roof will fill a 55-gallon barrel. Attach a hose to the spigot or put your watering can under the spigot to use the water wherever you want.
- Collecting and using rainwater helps our lakes and streams, because storm water would otherwise run off into the storm sewers, carrying with it pollutants such as oil, bacteria, nutrients and more directly to lakes and streams.
- When cities use less municipal water, the impact on the environment is reduced as well. Drawing water from an aquifer, lake or river faster than it is naturally regenerated can adversely affect every living creature in the area.

Helpful Tips:

- If you don't have a model that uses a diverter, be sure to use a screen to keep mosquitoes, leaves and other debris out of the barrel and water.
- Use an overflow hose or other device to direct excess water away from house foundation when the barrel is full. Install a rain garden and direct overflow from your rain barrel and downspout to the rain garden.
- Monitor the barrel to ensure intakes and overflows aren't blocked and that it is not becoming a home for mosquitoes.
- Direct your home's downspouts to a grassy area away from your home's foundation if you don't have them directed to a rain barrel, rather than allowing storm water to flow to the street gutter.
- During the winter, make sure the rain barrel is drained and disconnected.

Water stored in a rain barrel or cistern is not potable, and should not be used as drinking water.

Rain Barrel Resources

Rain barrels are usually about 40-60 gallons. You can purchase commercially made ones, but many local groups sell them. You can also make your own if you have a barrel. The simple parts are available at any hardware store.