

Save Your Water for Your Plants

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Wouldn't it be great if you could save some rain to water your plants during the dry season? Rain barrels are great way to not only save rain but also reduce stormwater runoff and the impact on the environment.

Excess rain can erode soil and wash plant materials, fertilizers, pesticides, and pet waste from your lawn and landscape beds, as well as road dust and oil from driveways and roads. Since every yard and neighborhood is connected to water bodies, polluted stormwater runoff can enter those water bodies and ultimately into the aquifer where we get our drinking water. You can keep some of this excess water from becoming stormwater runoff by capturing before it leaves your house.



Rain barrels can capture a significant amount of water and have a positive effect on your water bill, especially if you connect your rain barrels together and use them to supplement your irrigation. It's easy to fill up a rain barrel with just one rain event because 1 inch of rain on a 1,000 sq. ft. roof yields over 600 gallons of water.

Rain barrels are easily connected into the gutter system of a house and capture the water coming off the house. They are often made out of 50-80 gallon food-grade plastic drums with a hole cut out of the top, a spigot on the bottom, and an overflow outlet on the side. They should be made mosquito-proof by having a tight-fitting lid and a mesh screen. This will also keep out the leaves and some shingle debris.

They can be painted to blend in with the house or made into a decorative showpiece with flowers, wildlife, or even a mosaic painted on them. Since they are plastic, you should rough up the plastic with sandpaper and prime it with a paint used for plastic before painting your masterpiece.

If hidden usefulness is your goal, you can also place them behind a shrub or trellis to keep the area more attractive. In Virginia, my rain barrel used to be behind a large holly and painted the color of the house and my homeowner's association could never tell it was there.

Rain water is soft water, devoid of minerals, chlorine, fluoride and other chemicals that may be in drinking water, so it is very good for the plants. Although the water is good for plants, it shouldn't be used for people and animals, so I wouldn't recommend washing your dog in it or using it as a water fountain for your kids.

You should think about the use of your rain barrel before you place it somewhere. I kept one rain barrel close to a garden on the side of the house so I could hand water the plants during dry weeks. By elevating the rain barrel on concrete blocks, I could easily get a watering can under the spigot and the elevation helps increase the water pressure. You can also attach a soaker hose to water nearby plants, but make sure you remove the pressure-reducing washer first.

The overflow hole can also be put to good use. Since a little rain fills up the barrel quickly, a lot of water will be overflowing out of the barrel. This is where you can attach another barrel or piping to carry the water away from the house to a nearby planter bed.

Rain barrels are not difficult to make and several designs are out there, including one on the UF/IFAS Extension Alachua County website (<http://alachua.ifas.ufl.edu>) called "Creating a Rain Barrel for Water Conservation." They are also available for purchase at several big box stores, as well as the extension office for \$60 each.

If you want to learn more about rain barrels and ways to save water in your yard, attend my upcoming class, "Florida-Friendly Landscaping—Save Water, Save Money" on Apr 7 from 2:30 to 4 p.m. at the extension office. Call 352-337-6209 to register.