

Water Barrels

Rain catchment systems may one day make an essential contribution to resolving our water crisis. After all, we get lots of rain here in South Florida. The trick is to retain it for when we need it.

As residential irrigation accounts for nearly 50 percent of the typical household's water consumption, rain catchment systems can significantly reduce the use of treated tap water, lowering monthly water bills substantially.

Some rain catchment systems consist of a large tank and require cover, filtration and treatment. However, other methods of water collection from rooftop runoff can provide an ample supply of "soft" water that contains no chlorine, lime or calcium. Because it tends to have fewer sediments and dissolved salts than municipal water, rain water is ideal for gardens, planter beds, indoor tropicals like ferns and orchids and even automobile washing.

While lined retention ponds can irrigate large tracts, simple rain barrels provide enough water for the average homeowner. Rain barrels, made from food-grade black recycled plastic, hold around 57 gallons of water. They're attached to the downspout from your gutter and come with a five-foot overflow tube which you can direct to your planter beds. The spigot at the base of the barrel connects to your garden hose.

"While homeowners can irrigate new plantings enough during the first month to get their root systems established, rain barrels and catchment ponds could really cut the strain on our limited water resources when used on the rest of the landscape," said Elise Ryan, nursery owner and member of the Grow Smart Task Force.

It only takes 1/4 inch of rainfall runoff from the average roof to completely fill the 57-gallon barrel. In fact, rain barrels can repay their \$30 cost in only a month or two. Furthermore, a rain barrel diverts water runoff from the foundation of your house, making it more secure.

Rain barrel assembly (downspout, splash lid, screen and hoses) shouldn't take the average homeowner more than an hour to install. Rain barrels work on gravity and need no electricity.

If you have questions about any of these Water Smart techniques, call the South Florida Water Management District at 561-686-8800 or the Palm Beach County Extension Master Gardener Hotline at 561-233-1750.