

LAKEWOLD GARDENS

An Inspirational Experience

Rainbarrels—Harvesting the Rain by Margaret Morey, Lakewold Volunteer

Across the country, people are reducing their carbon footprint by buying local produce, conserving energy, and carefully utilizing natural resources. This includes the growing use of rainbarrels to collect rainwater. Rainbarrels can be ordered online (fully assembled), bought at the local hardware stores (Lowe's and Home Depot), or even constructed at home with a few common items. Online, rainbarrels run between \$100-\$200 (www.rainbarrel.net "Spruce Creek Rainsaver") plus \$39 shipping. At Lowe's, a rainbarrel (just the barrel, no hoses) is \$90. If you build it yourself, the cost is around \$50 (www.taunton.com/finegardening/how-to/videos/build-a-rain-barrel.aspx), or go to the library and check out "Workbench" magazine October 2008, pg. 54-57 for step-by-step instructions, again for about \$50.

A few tips for using rainbarrels, whether purchased or home-made:

1. Since water is gravity-fed out of the barrel, the rainbarrel needs to be elevated and level. Raising it on a platform or stand using cement blocks, bricks or railroad ties work well. Be sure to level so the barrel doesn't tip.
2. Screen your water by placing a piece of window screening over the top. This prevents debris from entering the barrel and clogging the spigot or hose. It also keeps critters (insects, birds, etc.) from drowning in and contaminating the water.
3. Tip the spigot (or faucet, if you build it yourself) partially to the side. This makes filling a watering can or attaching a hose easier.
4. DO NOT buy cheap when buying the rainbarrel container. A cheap container may be flimsy and inclined to deform or even burst when full. The author of the "Workbench" magazine article recommends a Rubbermaid "Brute" 40 gallon trash can.

Rainwater is not chemically treated, so you don't have to worry about chlorine, fluoride or lime that might harm your plants. Whatever method you choose, your plants (and wallet, over the long run) will thank you.

All right, so you've bought—or even made your rainbarrel, set it up, waited for and received rain. Boy did you get rain! Now what? Fill up the watering can or connect the hose and water away, right? Not quite. There are a few factors to consider before using your harvested H₂O.

1. Ensure the screen you top the barrel with is very fine. Mosquitoes would love to have access to your rainbarrel to lay their eggs. West Nile Virus, anyone?
2. Protect against chemicals. Have you, like many Washingtonians, treated your roof with moss killer? If so, let a couple of "rainfall events" occur before collecting the rainwater. What kills moss will kill other plants.
3. Protect against zinc. If you have a zinc strip on your roof, you'll need to remove it. Every time it rains, the rainwater picks up a micro-dose of zinc. Again, this is not conducive to the health of plants.
4. Consider your roof. If your roof is constructed from copper, old-fashioned tar and gravel, asbestos or treated cedar shakes/shingles, the chemicals from these materials will leach into the rainwater. If you're using the rainwater on edible plants, this is not good for your health. Metal and tile roofs provide little to no contamination of rainwater, with aluminum roofing considered to be the best rooftop material. Aluminum roofing can add a trace of aluminum to rainwater, but this is not considered to be a health risk.
5. Consider wildlife. Do you have a lot of wildlife visitors to your property/roof? Raccoon feces can carry bacteria which can cause disease in humans. This is only a concern if you use harvested rainwater on edibles and fail to wash them with soap and water before eating.
6. Consider your gutters. What is your gutter system made of? Aluminum yes, but many may also have lead soldering or lead-based paints. Make sure you know before using harvested rainwater.

These are a few things to concern yourself with in terms of your rainbarrel project. Stay inspired though -- If your roof is 30x40 ft. (1200 square feet) and receives just one inch of rain, 700 (or more) gallons of water can be produced! The bottom line is that rainwater harvesting is a safe and environmentally-responsible way to utilize a natural resource, save money, and reduce the amount of storm water runoff from your property to our collective water table. We have a wonderful resource to us here in Puget Sound; let's not let it run down the (storm) drain!

For additional information read "Absorb the Storm: Create a Rain-friendly Yard and Neighborhood", available at www.lcbp.org/stormwater/index.html