

# Rain Wealth not Waste with Rain Barrels and Rain Gardens

Homeowners in the Rock River Basin can preserve water quality - a few buckets at a time - and beautify their property at the same time by either saving rain in rain barrels or by constructing a rain garden.

Our grandparents, and many of us can remember the familiar image of an old oak whiskey barrel by the side of the house or the cistern in the basement. Well these old ideas are new again, but without the mosquito concerns of the past or the need to dip the water out with a bucket.

Instead of viewing the clean rainwater rushing off our roofs as something to get rid of as quickly as possible, many folks are taking advantage of this free resource. Capturing it and using it to water flowers and lawns is particularly smart as rain water is slightly acidic which flowering plants love. If you live in the city this nice soft water doesn't contain salts, chlorine or fluoride. An additional benefit is by using rain, you're not wasting water that has gone through all the steps necessary to make it clean, safe drinking water; water you've paid for through your utility bills. In some parts of the country it is even illegal to use drinking water for outdoor watering, in the Rock River Basin we often feel we are awash in groundwater but that isn't true everywhere. In some areas of the basin municipal, industrial and/or irrigation wells have significantly lowered the groundwater table. Actions we can all take can both increase infiltration while reducing harmful runoff.

Modern rain barrels use screens or other methods to keep debris and mosquitoes out and have a handy spigot near the bottom to fill a bucket or to attach a hose. You can even attach an in-line pump and move the water easily throughout the yard. UW-Extension has put together a 'Rain Barrel Sources of Southern Wisconsin' fact sheet which has many different styles and prices of rain barrels ranging from ones made out of 55 gallon plastic barrels to actual oak whisky barrels and even attractive molded plastic commercial rain barrels. For the hard core rain harvester, 250 and larger gallon plastic cisterns are also available. The fact sheet can be found at [www.rockrivercoalition/RRB/RRSG.asp](http://www.rockrivercoalition/RRB/RRSG.asp).

A 55 gallon rain barrel, the standard size, can catch about 2 tenths of an inch of rain, and of course if they aren't emptied between rains, the next time they catch less. So they are primarily used to turn rain into a resource for watering flowers, trees, shrubs and lawns.

However one of the biggest reasons people are being encouraged to put in rain barrels is to help reduce stormwater from our urban areas. Rain water and snow melt rushing off of our roofs, driveways and parking lots can be a big problem for our lakes and rivers. The water is often contaminated with heavy metals, nutrients and other chemicals. One solution is to grab this runoff before it can hit the street, rush down the storm drain and to the river, by capturing it first in a rain garden, which is a slightly sunken perennial garden that collects rainwater from a roof or paved area and allows it to seep into the soil.

"Sometimes, people feel frustrated by complex environmental problems because it seems there is little anyone can do to make a difference," says Suzanne Wade, a University of Wisconsin natural resources educator in the Rock River Basin. "A rain garden, however, is something an individual can do protect the environment. It is a way for people to do the right thing. And the gardens are a beautiful addition to a home."

Rain gardens differ from ordinary perennial gardens because they are planted in a shallow, flat-bottomed earthen bowl. This bowl is then filled with native perennial flowering plants. Popular choices include Sunflower, Black-eyed Susan, Liatris, Gay Feather, Blue Flag Iris, Purple Cone Flower, Cardinal Flower, and Golden Alexander.

"The gardens should have a mix of flowers that bloom at different times of the year for a steady show of color," Wade advised.

These gardens benefit the environment because they increase the amount of water filtering into the ground, recharging groundwater and reducing the amount of water and pollutants washing into lakes and streams. Rain gardens can help prevent flooding and drainage problems, reduce shoreline erosion, and provide valuable wildlife habitats. If enough people constructed rain gardens, they could even reduce the need for costly municipal storm water treatment structures.

Rain gardens are easy to construct and maintain, similar to any perennial garden, Wade said. The biggest jobs are excavating and preparing the sunken planting bed and pulling weeds until the perennial plants become established. Once the garden is growing, it needs no watering or fertilizing.

"Some people ask if a rain garden is a breeding place for mosquitoes," Wade said. "it is not. Water only stands in the depression for only one to two days before it is absorbed into the soil, so mosquito eggs and larva cannot survive there."

Wade says that building rain gardens in parks, or near municipal buildings, schools and churches makes a great community service project for schools and civic organizations.

More information about how to construct and plant a rain garden is available in two University of Wisconsin-Extension publications: "Rain Gardens: A household way to improve water quality in your community" and "Rain Gardens: A how-to manual for homeowners." Both can be downloaded free of charge at <http://clean-water.uwex.edu/pubs/raingarden/index.html>.