

Harvest rain water for use on lawn, in garden

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The old Bing Crosby standard "Pennies from Heaven" reminds us that rain falling from the sky is valuable and that clouds and showers now lead to sunshine and flowers later. The song recommends turning your umbrella upside down to catch this treasure.

Yet our current practices for managing rain water in urban areas follows an opposite approach. Free water falls from the sky. We funnel it off of our property to the nearest street or drainage easement as fast as we possibly can through gutters, pipes, drains, sumps and ditches.

Then, having gotten rid of that annoying free water that fell when or where we didn't want it, we turn around and buy water to apply to our grass and gardens.

Even considering that tap water generally costs only pennies per gallon (compared to dollars for bottled water) those pennies can add up quickly when we are sprinkle the lawn for hours every summer.

Of course, unlike money, water in the wrong place at the wrong time can definitely do some serious damage to our stuff. We need to manage the stormwater from our impervious roofs, drives and walks. But with a little planning we don't have to actually throw it away or let it run off.

Rain harvesting, through the use of rain barrels and cisterns is a common-sense practice from ancient times that is starting to make a comeback throughout the United States. In arid parts of the country, rain harvesting techniques can be a solution to water shortages and drought use-restriction during summer months. In wetter areas like ours, they can be a great tool to reduce peak stormwater flows, reduce urban impacts on water quality, and save money.

While rainwater collected in rain barrels has many uses, the most common is watering landscapes and gardens.

Rainwater can actually improve the health of plants. It is naturally soft water and doesn't contain minerals, chlorine or fluoride.

How much water can you collect? The average monthly rainfall during the growing season in Hobart for example is 3.7 inches. That amount of rain falling on a 1,000-square-foot roof will generate more than 2,200 gallons of soft, fresh water that, if harvested, can be used to water vegetable gardens, flower beds or lawns between storms.

A wide range of rain barrels in different styles can be purchased at many retail garden stores or online. Even better, to "reduce, reuse and recycle", the moderately handy individual can make their own by retro-fitting recycled food grade drums or barrels which also come in a variety of shapes and colors.

If you are concerned about aesthetics, some communities have gone so far to have rain barrel art contests with beautiful results.

There are many tricks and tips for getting the most from your rain barrel -- for example, screening to prevent mosquitoes, and emptying between storms.

For more information about rain barrels, workshops and promotions in our region, go to www.nirpc.org/environment/water.htm