

Rain barrels save water, not much money
10/14/2008
Orlando Sentinel - Online

Now that the South Florida Water Management District has clamped down with permanent Water restrictions, folks are talking seriously about water conservation. Throughout South Florida, rain-harvesting barrels are beginning to appear next to homes. The smallest rain barrels store about 25 gallons. The largest can hold up to 1,000. Most people use them for watering container gardens or flower beds, and the larger ones can provide enough water to wash a car.

But this is more about conservation than saving money. A rain barrel won't make much of a dent in your water bill. One 50-gallon rain barrel is only enough to water a few containers, and only the largest 1,000-gallon barrels are big enough to irrigate a lawn, the biggest water hog.

Rain barrels are easy

Rain barrels are an easy way to store water, said Keith Patton, extension agent with the Palm Beach County Extension office. A heavy summer rain will fill a standard 50-gallon rain barrel in minutes. Any extra water, such as during heavy rains, pours from the overflow valve. This overflow can be diverted through a hose into the yard.

So far, local governments have been the big movers behind rain barrel programs. In Palm Beach County, Patton runs a program where residents can get a 50-gallon barrel for around \$50 and learn how to hook it up. The county has sold 400 barrels this year. In Broward, Deerfield Beach sponsors \$35 seminars, and other cities are considering launching programs.

Residential rain barrels are easy to use. You simply attach the barrel to a gutter downspout using a flexible hose. A hose spigot at the bottom allows you to screw in an ordinary garden hose, and an overflow valve at the top diverts extra water.

'I got my rain barrel two Christmases ago,' said Heather Deeley, a Pompano Beach resident. 'I use it mostly for potted plants, although sometimes I'll hook it up to a drip hose. I also use it to fill up my pond.'

There are advantages to a rain barrel chlorine-free water but there are also limitations. Even the largest barrels aren't enough to really water turf, and because there's no pump, water pressure depends on how full the barrel is.

James Barton, a civil engineer with Chen & Associates in West Palm Beach who helped advise Palm Beach in its rain barrel program, uses water from his three barrels to irrigate newly planted fruit trees in his backyard.

'It's fun,' Barton said. 'Everyone should participate. It's a way to learn about conservation.'

Bugs no issue

Rain harvesting is even an option on some new homes. Guy DiVosta, president of GMD Construction in Palm Beach Gardens, is among the developers who includes rain barrels on his eco-friendly model homes.

'We design our homes with a gutter system,' DiVosta said. 'It allows for homes to be easily adaptable to a rain-harvesting system.'

WCI Communities, which recently filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection, also included a rain barrel on its model home in the Evergrene subdivision in Palm Beach Gardens.

If one barrel isn't enough, they can be chained together in almost unlimited numbers to form a large reservoir. This makes sense, considering we get almost all of our rain in a few short months. During the summer, Deeley said her barrel is always full but there's little need to irrigate. During the winter, the barrel quickly runs dry as the rains cease.

'I'd love to get some more,' she said.

Some people also worry about mosquitoes or other critters moving into their rain barrel. In a well-sealed system, with silicone around the downspout hose, this shouldn't be a problem. Mosquitoes could get in through the overflow valve, but Deeley said bugs have never been a problem.

If they are a problem, garden centers sell pellets that can be dropped into the barrel to kill mosquito larvae for a month, or Patton recommends pouring a thin layer of light cooking oil into the barrel. The larvae get stuck in the oil when they come up for air.

Costly answer

One thing you won't see in South Florida are large-scale rain-harvesting systems, including underground cisterns. These are popular elsewhere in the country, where homeowners might collect thousands of gallons of water and pump it out to power sprinkler systems and irrigation hoses, and some new homes include them as standard.

DiVosta, who is keenly interested in any conservation measures in his new homes, said the underground cisterns are too expensive in Florida. Patton, too, said that as long as water stays relatively inexpensive no matter the Water restrictions it's unlikely that cisterns will catch on.

Shave, however, does have an idea for homeowners who want to help replenish our stressed water supply.

'The best thing you can do is get extensions on your downspouts and redirect all that water into the lawn,' Shave said. 'It will filter down into the aquifer.'

Jon VanZile is an avid home gardener and a freelance writer. He lives in Pompano Beach.