

Wash away the worries of rain barrels

Collecting raindrops:
Just the facts, please

By Barbara Mahany
TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS

Driving by any old eco-conscious house, you might not realize that the whiskey-barrel-looking contraption hooked up to the downspout is not a vestige of the moonshine era but in fact the latest craze in collecting raindrops for flower pots, backyard veggies and that patch of ever-thirsty grass.

It's the rain barrel, people, and you might want to get up to speed on its pluses and minuses, because chances are these things are going to spread like, well, a cistern filled to spilling. In a world where every drop of water counts, why not reap what the heavens dump for free?

There is one detractor that's kind of hard to overlook: They can be downright dowdy.

Fat, round, bulging at the middle. Made of industrial-grade plastic. In reds and blues bright enough to make your eyes pop.

They're not exactly slinking incognito up against the siding. You may need a fatter bush to camouflage it, unless you're willing to pop for a sleeker sort of barrel or perhaps a square wooden one.

Let's take your other worries, one by one:

Isn't all that pooled water the very sort of spot where mosquitoes look to hatch their babies? Not if you put a screen on top, one with window-grade holes so even the skinniest squeegee can't squeeze through. And make sure you've got a tight fit where the downspout slips into the barrel. You can caulk any gaps.

How about critters inclined to take a swim? Again, make sure your rain barrel has a lid and a screen across the top opening. (It'll keep out curious kids as well.) And while you're at it, make sure your rain barrel is on solid ground. You might want to secure it by setting it on concrete slabs or bricks.

Do I need a bucket brigade to schlep the water from the barrel to the garden? Nope. Just make sure you get a rain barrel with a hose fitting. Even if you build your own, you can buy hose



CULLITON QUINN PHOTO

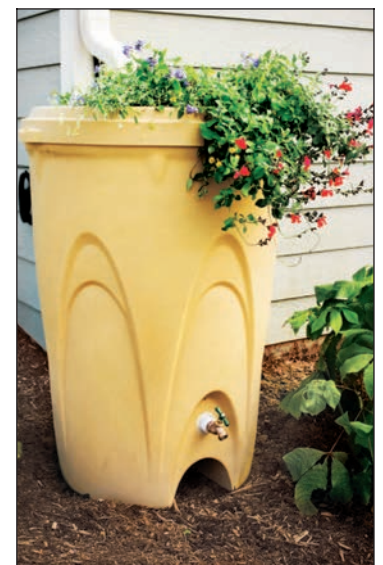
fittings at any hardware store for less than \$5. Just screw on your hose and squirt.

Really, how much water can I catch from one measly rain-fall? Here's a simple equation: For every inch of rain that falls on a 1,000-square-foot roof, you'll collect 600 gallons of rainwater. So if you have a rain barrel at all four corners, you could collect 150 gallons at each downspout, which is way more than the average

50-gallon barrel will hold. In other words, you'll fill your barrel in no time. And if you'd rather think in watering-can terms, assuming you've got a one-gallon can, at 8 pounds per gallon of water, you'll fill your can 600 times per one-inch rainfall, and never have to turn the tap, or boost your water bill. Your biceps and your backyard pots will thank you. And if you average, say, 20 inches of rain per year,

that's 12,000 gallons of free water.

What's so great about rain-water anyway? Well, if it's not good enough that it's heaven-sent, how about the fact that it's rich in nitrogen, and stripped of all the chemicals (chlorine or fluoride, among them) that come in tap water? Ever notice how green your grass looks after a rain, how perky your flowers are? That's the rainwater, hard at work.



Rain barrels run the gamut from custom-designed pieces such as the custom one at left, from Culliton Quinn Landscape Architecture Workshop, to versions offered by Exaco Trading, top, and Aquascape, bottom.

What if the darn thing gets too full and floods, say, my basement or my precious petunia beds? You'll want to make sure you buy or build a rain barrel with an overflow, which is basically an inside tube that directs the water out of the barrel and into the yard, away from where you wouldn't want it pooling.

bmahany@tribune.com