

## Harvesting Rain Water

Why should you harvest your rain water? People have harvested rain water for thousands of years. Ancient Romans had paved courtyards that directed rain water into cisterns which supplemented the water from aqueducts. Even in our early U.S. history, many ranchers and farmers lived with cisterns long before they could drill wells. And today, many homeowners are benefitting in a number of ways from saving large or small amounts of rain water to use at a later time.

Rain barrels used by homeowners here in North Florida serve the primary purpose of supplementing irrigation water used for vegetable and flower gardens, and for patio pots and planters. The average water use for watering lawns and plants, washing cars, and doing other outdoor projects is estimated to be around 30 to 35 gallons per person each day. Just think how using rain barrels for these outdoor activities could ease the strain on our depleted underground water.

But besides the conservation aspect of using free harvested rain water, water from the sky is pretty good stuff for our plants. Unlike some well water, rain water has very little dissolved minerals or salts, making it naturally soft. Rain water is highly oxygenated from all the splashing. It is also warmer and therefore less stressful for the plants being watered. Rain water is not chemically treated like the water from municipal sources. Besides being harmful to your plants, chlorine in treated water can kill beneficial bacteria in the soil and pollute the air as it evaporates.

Most people use a roof, gutters, and downspouts to fill their rain barrel. A one inch rain on 100 sq ft. of roof can just about fill a 50 gallon barrel. Our average annual rainfall in Lake City is a little over 56 inches, with summer months being the wettest. By harvesting rain and using it between rainfalls, a homeowner can use about 1300 gallon of water from the barrel over the summer months. Now that could amount to some dollar savings if you pay city water and sewer bills.

Used food grade barrels are the easiest to find and the most affordable. These 50 to 80 gallon plastic drums were used to ship food items such as pickles, olives, and juice. Be very careful that you do not purchase drums that have been filled with chemicals or detergents. Oak whiskey barrels have been popular in the past and are very attractive in many locations. Even large plastic trash cans can serve the purpose.

There are many ways that you can set up a rain barrel. Some are covered with screen and placed under areas with heavy water runoff like roof valleys. Or you can use a lidded barrel and insert a downspout. Put your barrel up on a platform, insert a spigot, and easily fill a watering can or attach a soaker hose. However you set up your system, just make sure your barrel is located near the area you want to water because there will only be enough pressure for a short hose. For a complete guide to making and using your very own rain barrel visit [http://sarasota.extension.ufl.edu/Hort/Pubs/rain\\_barrels\\_guide.pdf](http://sarasota.extension.ufl.edu/Hort/Pubs/rain_barrels_guide.pdf)

The UF Master Gardeners are available to help solve gardening problems on Tuesday and Thursday mornings at 386-752-5384. The UF Columbia County Extension will be holding a Spring Vegetable Gardening Class on February 28<sup>th</sup>. Call for more details.

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