

Don't let precious water just run away

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Environmental advocates and folks with green thumbs are revving up interest in rainwater. Specifically, they're keen on snatching a valuable resource that otherwise just washes away.

Rain barrels are drawing new fans. The benefits of these low-tech devices are touted at workshops and green festivals around South Florida. A few businesses and enterprising individuals sell them. Some homeowners fashion their own by recycling plastic drums.

The idea is delightfully simple -- put the rain barrel at the base of a gutter or downspout and enjoy a free, eco-friendly source of water for maintaining plants and lawns (the water is not suitable for drinking).

"Not only does it help conserve water resources, but it's better for your plants," says John Pipoly, urban horticulture extension agent for the University of Florida/Broward County Extension Education Section. Rainwater, he says, generally is preferable to municipal water for gardens because it provides a beneficial pH balance. "You won't need as much fertilizer," he says.

The Miami-Dade County Cooperative Extension Service is among the organizations that offer rain-barrel workshops. Staff and volunteers make barrels on site and hand them out to those attending. Those barrels are made from recycled food-grade drums, usually 55 or 60 gallons, says Barbara McAdam, a program assistant.

"Using the rain barrel means you're not turning on the hose," McAdam says. "Rain barrels are wonderful. They require no energy. You don't need to plug them in or power them up. It's doing something that's good for the environment. And it's going to save you money."

At McAdam's own home, she uses rainwater on her potted plants and runs a soaker hose to her vegetable garden. She also relies on the stored rainwater to scrub her outdoor furniture.

In Broward, Art Constantino offers educational workshops on rain barrels as a Florida master gardener affiliated with the UF/Broward County Extension Education program. "If you save this excellent water for use on your plants, you're going to be the winner," he says.

With homemade rain barrels, there's leeway for personalizing the look and materials, Constantino says. The basic technique generally involves modifying a container, such as a 55-gallon drum, to include a filter, a spigot and an overflow pipe that directs excess water away from the house and onto a specific area, such as a garden.

Constantino also displays what he refers to as "boutique rain barrels" that are generally more decorative and work nicely in an entryway garden or other area where bulkier, more industrial vessels may not be appropriate. These boutique styles tend to pair nicely with rain chains, which also may be decorative, and provide a gentler, less plentiful supply of water than a downspout.

Rain chains, like downspouts, are water-funneling devices. Styles range from simple links to fancy fluted copper cups. They may be attached to a gutter or another area of the house where water runs off, Constantino says.

Decorative rain barrels aren't necessarily homemade. The variations sold at Home Depot, for example, include one intended to look like a rock. This product, in a sandstone hue, sells for about \$100, including the downspout diverter kit.

Other ready-made rain barrels are available for purchase at shops and online. John Shave, a Broward-based landscape designer, partners with an irrigation company to produce and sell rain barrels made from recycled food-grade 55-gallon plastic drums. These barrels are equipped with a spigot, a removable screen filter and an overflow fitting and sell for \$75 at The Energy Store in Hollywood.

The benefits, he says, include a source of stored water during water restrictions. While plants and lawns are generally the most popular use for stored rainwater, Shave says, it's also suitable for flushing your toilet after a storm or washing your vehicle.

"They do take a bit of maintenance," Shave says. That includes removing leaves and other debris from the rain barrel's filter and the gutter supplying the water. Also, users need to guard against mosquito breeding and algae.