

Water Saving in the Garden

Some basic facts about cisterns and rain barrels

Catching and saving rainwater is nothing new. Generations ago, families saved water in barrels, ponds or cisterns for watering plants, washing clothes and even drinking. Such water-saving is still common in many parts of the world. The Pacific Northwest's reputation for rainy winters makes it hard to remember that summers are often dry. But between May and September, Seattle receives about seven inches of rain, only 20 percent of our annual precipitation.



Using native and other drought-tolerant plants can reduce your garden's water consumption. Limiting the amount of space devoted to thirsty lawn grass can also reduce water demand. But saving rainwater is also a great way to reduce your need for municipal water supplies.

In addition to benefitting your garden during the dry summer, rainwater catchment can be good for the environment. In older parts of some cities like

Seattle, stormwater pipes are connected to the sewer system. During heavy storms these pipes may overflow and release sewage into local waterways. By catching the water from your roof in a barrel or cistern, you reduce the amount going into storm drains and help prevent these harmful overflows.

Made of plastic, steel or concrete, cisterns store large amounts of water and come in many sizes 200 gallons and up. A smaller alternative is the old-fashioned rain barrel. There are manufactured rain barrels on the market, or you can build your own with large plastic drums or even garbage cans. One of the simplest systems is made up of several barrels connected with pipe; a spigot is attached low on each barrel and an overflow drain on the last barrel in line directs any extra water to a safe location.



Photo courtesy of Rain Dog Designs

Some simple planning will prevent the most common problems with rain-saving:

- ❖ Use a tight-fitting, light-blocking lid to keep children and animals out of the water and stop the development of algae.
- ❖ Add a screen to keep leaves and other debris out of the water.
- ❖ Use an overflow device to direct excess water away from your home's foundation when the tank is full.
- ❖ Monitor the cistern to ensure intakes and overflows aren't blocked.
- ❖ **Note:** Water stored in this system is not potable unless treated, and should not be used as drinking water.



If this all seems like a lot of work for a little water, remember that one inch of rain falling on 1,000 square feet of roof adds up to 623 gallons. That's enough to keep a lot of petunias happy!

To see if you are eligible for a cistern rebate visit [RainWise](http://www.rainwise.seattle.gov).



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