



Saving Water in the Landscape

In our "feast or famine" summers, saving water in the landscape can be approached in two ways. One is to capture and save rainwater. The other is to plan and plant specifically for dryer soils, so that irrigation isn't needed. This spring has seen a bountiful supply of water. For many that meant flooding and it's hard to even imagine the possibility of drought in August.

Capturing and reusing rainwater as needed is fairly simple. Rain barrels, rain gardens, small retention areas and redirecting sump pump discharge hoses or downspouts can be either large or small scale fixes, according to space available.

Ready-made rain barrels are available through local garden centers, online vendors and even some park districts and generally run in sizes of 55 gallons. The Eco-Rain Barrel collects and stores both rainwater and recovered household water. This durable 55-gallon container, made from recycled food and liquid containers, features drain valves at the bottom with garden hose threads, removable screen

lids, and a 1-1/2" internal capacity is easily doubled or tripled. It also includes an optional valve located 16" off the ground to provide easy access for buckets or watering cans. It weighs just thirty pounds when empty, which makes it manageable for most people.

The Flora Rain Barrel and Planter doubles as both a rainwater storage unit and a planting container. It's a 55-gallon rain barrel that looks and is used just like a decorative planter, and has all the essential elements for rainwater collection, storage, and distribution. It is available in two designer-friendly colors.

Also available is a Stacking Rain Catchment System. This modified rain barrel allows for vertical stacking, which effectively doubles water storage capacity in the same footprint. Its octagonal shape fits flat against walls and blends in well with buildings. An indented top inlet maximizes water inflow. This particular unit also features theft deterrent hardware for use in high traffic or public areas.

Most ready-made rain barrels are expandable through an optional linkage kit. Water storage

capacity is easily doubled or tripled. When the main rain barrel fills completely, a lateral portal directs the overflow water automatically into the next barrel instead of into the ground, driveway or curb.

Also available is a rain diverter, which attaches to your downspout and allows you to completely bypass the water collection system. You can either direct water into the rain barrel by simply flipping an arm down, or bypass the water collection system altogether by flipping it up.

The handy gardener can make a rain barrel at home. Directions can be found through a library search or online. To be on the safe side, use only new barrels or clean secondhand barrels formerly used to store edibles such as vinegar.

Rain gardens take advantage of low spots already near a downspout or sump pump discharge, or an artificial low spot can be created. The low spot can be backfilled with coarse stone, finished with soil and planted with trees, shrubs and herbaceous plants that thrive in wet

conditions. An excellent source of free information for building your own rain garden is the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

An often-overlooked source of free, fresh water for irrigation is the discharge from the foundation sump pump. Lightweight, corrugated plastic pipe is available in diameters of 3 or 4 inches. Six-foot long sections snap together without tools. Just slide one end of a corrugated pipe over the discharge outlet and add or remove sections to reach planting beds or lawn areas in rotation.

Xeriscaping is a term coined by a Colorado water task force, born out of a severe drought in 1977. Xeri- is a prefix meaning "dry", and -scaping implies deliberate design. Xeriscaping is a more or less opposite approach to the usual way of gardening in the Chicago area. Instead of the more traditional approach of enhancing moisture in the soil and building in sprinkler or irrigation systems, Xeriscaping actually promotes dryness. Crushed stone is often added to planting beds to enhance drainage. Drought-loving plants are selected and once established require little irrigation. In fact, the bane of drought-loving plants is a cold wet winter or spring.

For an informal Xeriphytic landscape, think mountain meadow flowers. Every year in late fall or very early spring we scatter drought-tolerant seed collections in a corner of the yard that is dry and sunny year round. California poppies, red flax, meadow pinks and bachelor's buttons are just some of the flowers that do well here. Some self-sow each year and every summer brings a joyful mini-meadow that changes from week to week as new flowers mature and old ones fade.

