

What are Rain Barrels and Why Use Them?

Water conservation is important to preserve our fresh water supply. There are many outdoor water-saving tips that can be used to help save on tap water use. One way is to use rain barrels or catchers to collect and store rainwater from rooftops for lawn and garden use. Rain barrels can also conserve water, help reduce water bills, and reduce pollution by reducing stormwater runoff.

The water collected in the rain barrel would normally flow off the roof or through roof gutters and downspouts becoming stormwater runoff. Depending on the house location, this runoff can travel onto paved surfaces and eventually into a storm drain.

Rain barrels can be used to save water for plants during dry periods. They can also be arranged to slowly release the collected rain fall to areas that can soak up the water, reducing stormwater runoff and increasing groundwater recharge.

The good news is that rain barrels are inexpensive, easy to install and easy to operate and maintain. Ready-made rain barrels can be purchased from local suppliers or on-line.

To Keep Garden Produce Safe, How Should I Use the Water Collected in the Rain Barrel?

As the water collected in the rain barrel is coming off a roof, into gutters and down downspouts, it is not considered to be “drinkable” or potable water. Remember, birds and animals are also on the roof. So, water from the roof can contain bacteria and other disease-causing organisms from bird and other animal waste that might be on the roof. How you use this water in your garden and the type of plants you use it on is an important consideration. Rain barrel water is fine if used to water non- edible plants – like flowers or lawns.

But Can I Use the Water In My Vegetable Garden?

Yes, but only in the same way that other non-potable water is used. Avoid using overhead irrigation. It is best to use this water for drip or trickle irrigation. This prevents contamination of edible above the ground plant parts that are hard to clean, especially leafy greens. *However*, the vegetable is **not** safe to eat unless it is thoroughly washed using “drinkable” water first.

Rain barrel water should not be used close to harvest time to water the vegetable garden and should **NEVER** be used to wash fruits or vegetables from the garden or orchard prior to consumption.

What can I do at home to reduce the risk of harmful microbial contamination of fresh produce from the garden?

- ✓ Choose produce that is not bruised or damaged.
- ✓ Refrigerate or chill produce immediately after harvest.
- ✓ Wash hands with warm water and soap before and after handling fresh produce.
- ✓ Wash fresh fruits and vegetables under cool running tap water. **NEVER** use soap or detergents. Air dry or dry with a clean paper towel.
- ✓ Scrub firm produce such as melons and cucumbers with a clean hard bristle brush under cool running tap water.
- ✓ Cut away any bruised or damaged areas with a clean knife.
- ✓ Don't cross contaminate. Always wash and sanitize cutting boards, counters, utensils and dishes that come in contact with raw meat, fish or poultry before using to prepare fresh produce.

Source: FDA5/08

How can I get more information about rain barrels and uses for the water from them?

URI Cooperative Extension
Food Safety Education Program
401-874-2972/2960
email-pivarnik@uri.edu, mpatnoad@uri.edu

Water Quality Program
401-874-5398
Email- alyson@uri.edu, hburdett@uri.edu

For more information on rain barrels visit :

<http://www.uri.edu/ce/healthylandscapes/rainbsources.html>

For more information on food safety visit:

<http://www.uri.edu/ce/ceec/foodsafety.shtml>

7/08

SAFE Use of Rain Barrel Water in the Vegetable Garden



**URI Cooperative Extension
Food Safety Education Program
Water Quality Program**