

April 22, 2015



Rain: Saving for a Sunny Day
By Alice Cantelow
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Wow. What a dry year. And yet there HAS been rain. Were you prepared and able to store some of that precious rain for your parched garden? If not, it's never too late to get set up for the future!

Rainwater is a wonderful resource that every homeowner has but few take advantage of. Those who do are generally rewarded with free, clean water that plants love. And even though rainwater may not be able to replace other water entirely, it can make a big dent.

It often amazes people how much water can be collected from even a light rain. As an example, a quick storm with one inch of rain dumps more than 1,000 gallons of water on a standard 1,700 square foot house. 1000 gallons! Or, if we look at a whole year, the same size house had the potential of storing over 25,000 gallons of water in Placerville over the course of this relatively dry winter. To see how much rain fell on your own house, try the easy rooftop calculator at permadesign.com.

The problem, then, is not how much rain there is to collect -- there are literally tons. The question is: "what's the most efficient way to store and use all that rain water falling on my house?" Some of the simplest ways to use that water are for gardens, fire suppression, toilet flushing, and/or clothes washing. Here, we'll focus on gardens. But do look into some of those other great uses for your rainwater.

Watering the plants in California gardens is generally responsible for at least half of all the water each household uses. For those of us with large gardens, or orchards and veggie gardens, that percentage can be much higher.

Those plants we now water with potable water generally love the soft water that rain provides. It's good to consider where the water flowed after it fell, though, if you are planning to use it on

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edibles. If this is the first rain of the season, you might even want to divert the first flows so that contamination is reduced. There are clever, relatively inexpensive devices you can add to your rain gutter system to do that.

The first big decision is how you will store the rain. Many people start with one rain barrel, but find it is quickly filled to the brim. One solution, particularly if you have access to cheap barrels, is to connect a series of rain barrels together. As appealing as it is to use used barrels, be sure you know they are food grade if you are going to use them on edibles, and that they have been thoroughly cleaned.

You can also buy a wide variety of polyethylene tanks to store larger quantities of water. Some people have even been successful using an old above ground pool. Not all size configurations of storage are acceptable, though. In general, you want your storage short and squat (no more than 2:1 height to width) for safety reasons. Also, tanks 5,000 gallons or less installed on grade do not need a permit. Refer to the California Plumbing Code, Chapter 17 for specific requirements. And be sure and exclude mosquitoes, no matter what system you use.

Once you've stored some rain, be sure and use it! A drought year like this one is actually ideal for rainwater use. It rains, the barrels/tanks fill, and then you use that rain during the dry weeks that follow to water your garden. This can be repeated over and over, especially during fall, spring and early summer, when plants are still actively growing and rain is still intermittently falling. In this way, a simple 50-gallon barrel can yield hundreds of gallons of useable water.

There are many nuances to effective rainwater use in the Sierra foothills. To learn more details, come to the upcoming free master gardener class given by Alice Cantelow on "Rainwater Harvesting and Greywater Use," this Saturday, April 25, from 9:00 a.m. to noon in the Government Center Hearing room, Building C, 2850 Fairlane Court in Placerville.

Come one, come all to the annual spring Master Gardener Plant Sale in the Veterans Memorial Building parking lot, Saturday, May 2, 2015 from 8:00a.m.to 3:00 p.m. Plants tenderly-grown by master gardeners are available at reasonable prices: summer veggies -- heirloom tomatoes: yes! Water-efficient landscape plants, annuals and perennials, succulents and mini-seminars. Don't miss this opportunity. 130 Placerville Drive, Placerville.

Look for our UCCE Master Gardener Booth at this year's Home and Garden Show, with free gardening seminars and lots of information and gardening advice available, 100 Placerville Drive in Placerville from April 24-26, 2015.

UCCE Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512). Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at <http://ucanr.edu/edmg>. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter. You can also find us on Facebook.