

## Saving on rainy days

By Tracy Hobson Lehmann  
Express-News Home & Garden Editor

Web Posted : 07/13/2002 12:00 AM

"It's either feast or famine," lamented a neighbor surveying his lawn after last week's deluge. Only a few days earlier, we were fretting over cracked ground that was baking under dry summer skies. "Too bad we couldn't save some of that rain for when we need it."

Many are doing exactly that, collecting precipitation for not-so-rainy days. The savings options range from piggy-bank plans — filling a bucket or a trash can on the patio in a downpour — to major investment strategies that provide water for all household needs.

Veteran gardener Dee Emory relies on her three rain barrels to store water for more than 50 large and thirsty containers around her landscape. Her 55-gallon drums are the simplest of receptacles, and she plans to add two barrels with spigots to store water for irrigating her vegetable garden. That, she says, will take care of all her landscape irrigation except in severe droughts.

Though 50 gallons might not seem like a lot of water, it adds up, says Eddie Wilcut, conservation planner with San Antonio Water System.

"If everybody in San Antonio was to put a 50-gallon barrel out and collect that water, it's a tremendous amount of water," he says, figuring that if each of SAWS' 250,000 residential customers collected 50 gallons of water a month, the annual savings would total 150 million gallons — roughly one day's pumpage from the Edwards Aquifer.

And it takes surprising little rain to fill up water tanks. Every square foot of roof yields about a half-gallon of water, if it's diverted through downspouts into a barrel or tank.

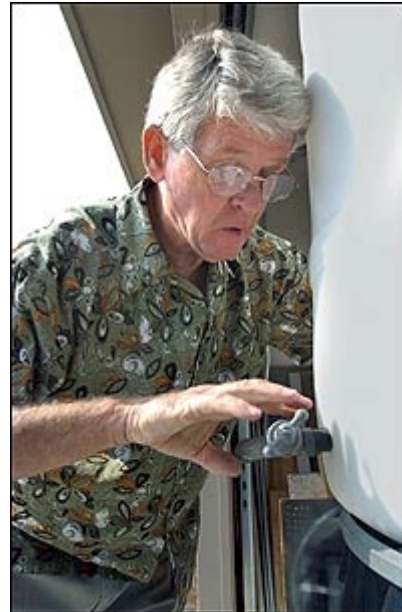
The two 11,000-gallon tanks at Dan Pomerening's house are overflowing after the recent deluge. Pomerening, an engineer at Southwest Research Institute, and wife Mary Dunford rely on Mother Nature to supply all the water — including drinking water — for their eco-sensitive house in far west Bexar County.

Though few rainwater harvesters in the area opt for potable water, the numbers are growing, and many more families and businesses are relying on rainwater to irrigate landscapes — much like early residents of the Hill Country.

"There is nothing new under the sun. A lot of people's grandparents had cisterns," says Andy Betz, president of Rainwater Collection Over Texas, an Austin company that installs rainwater harvesting systems. "It's becoming an accepted way to (provide water), as opposed to 15 years ago when it was hippies playing with plastic pipes."

Pomerening sings the praises of his water, which is naturally soft and tastes great. It is filtered daily and treated with ozone to clean it.

Whole-house systems, though, are costly, and families must have ample storage capacity or import water during drought.



Tom Harris, a member of Gardening Volunteers of South Texas, fits a spigot on a plastic barrel. The volunteer group will demonstrate how to make rain barrels from noon to 3 p.m. July 28 at Milberger's Landscaping and Nursery on Loop 1604 at Bulverde Road.  
Tom Reel/Express-News

"A whole-house system means you have to adjust your lifestyle," says Jennifer Radlet, co-owner of Save Our Rain, a Boerne business that specializes in rainwater collection. "You have to install low-flow shower heads, low-flow toilets, and, if you can afford it, a low-flow washing machine." For most conservation-minded individuals, that's not a problem.

"Water becomes something you tend and care for" as harvesters monitor tank levels, she says. "You develop a relationship with water that isn't there when you're on a public system."

Pomerening calculated that his three-person household would use about 5,000 gallons of water each month, and he installed water-saving devices in the house, making him comfortable with his two- to three-month supply capacity. "But you are at the whims of Mother Nature."

He figures the \$28,000 he invested in his tanks, a storage barn with a metal roof, hardware and filters cost about 25 percent more than he would have invested in a well and water treatment.

Cost and capacity are what limit homeowners in water storage.

"Most homeowners wouldn't put in a rainwater harvesting system looking at quick payback," says Wilcutt, who estimates systems cost about \$1 per gallon for above-ground storage and \$3 a gallon for underground tanks. "We see a lot more applications for businesses because they have larger roof sizes." The recycled rainwater can be pumped through cooling towers and used on landscapes. Businesses also don't have to worry as much about how to accommodate large storage tanks.

In a residential neighborhood, having a 20,000-gallon cistern would be a lot like keeping an elephant in the back yard.

But, Radlet notes, homeowners have a number of options with tanks, including wood, fiberglass, metal and ferrocement tanks that can look like part of a hillside. Polyethylene plastic tanks are the most common, though, because they are the cheapest choice.

At the offices of Authentic Custom Homes in Boerne, builder Israel Peña installed two tanks underground and an above-ground tank that's concealed with a wooden structure. Like most rainwater harvesters, he uses the system for landscape irrigation.

Peña and Authentic Custom Homes design manager Jim Terrian planned the system as they built the office. They wanted to show clients how new technologies fit with old-style designs. In the process, Terrian says, he has learned that big trees and water collection don't mix especially well.

"We are surrounded by huge oak trees," he says. "We get leaves and pollen in the water, and that discolors the water. It looks like tea."

Also, he says, the roof where the water is collected can't be too steep because the water will run off too fast and overflow the gutters.

Though it's easiest to plan for rainwater harvesting, the systems can be retrofitted.

"If you're building, you can integrate the system into the home," Radlet says. "A lot of commercial establishments in Germany use rainwater for toilets, showers and clothes washing. You can plumb that right in and hide tanks under the building during construction, which is a great advantage."



**Tom Harris drills a hole in a plastic barrel to convert the container to a water-harvesting device.**  
Tom Reel/Express-News

Homeowners who add storage tanks to existing homes



**Jim Terrian operates the waterfall designed into the rain-collection system at his office in Boerne. Builder Israel Peña installed the system.**

have to blend them with the landscape, usually with trellises or a similar camouflage.

Usually, Radlet says, folks are so happy as harvesters that the tanks become a natural part of the landscape. With that sort of enthusiasm, advocates of rainwater collection think more people will take advantage of Mother Nature's water supply.

*tlehmann@express-news.net*

07/13/2002

[Click here to return](#)