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Rain barrels help homeowners stay above water

By Tim Smith
STAFF WRITER

COLUMBIA -- Ned Barrett of Spartanburg doesn't feel guilty when he waters his plants now, even though the Upstate suffers from an extreme drought and water utilities are pleading with customers to conserve.

That's because Barrett's source of outdoor water is a 55-gallon rain barrel, which storms keep refreshed enough to keep his plants healthy and green.

He's one of a growing number of Upstate residents who are turning to methods once used by Romans and Maya Indians to collect and store water in dry times.

"There are some great opportunities for folks to create their own water source, so to speak," said Scott Stapleton, owner of Ascot Earth Systems of Greer, which sells cisterns and rain harvesting systems. "It's something a lot of builders and developers in our area are starting to implement."

Steve Patton, a Spartanburg gardener, had been using a rain barrel for about eight years when the shallow well that supplied water for his home started having problems.

So he arranged to have Stapleton bury a 1,000-gallon cistern in his yard, fed from a downspout off his roof. Now he has plenty of water for outdoor needs and plans to replumb his home so it can supply wash and bathroom water.

"It's been wonderful having all that water to water the garden with," he said. "It's been kind of a luxury."

Stapleton said more and more residents and businesses are harvesting rainwater around the nation to help cope with droughts, water restrictions and planning regulations.

"In most cases in the Southeast, these systems are being used as a supplemental source," he said. "It offers builders and developers a chance to build on unbuildable land. They can run a home off nothing but rainwater. We receive enough rain here in South Carolina to provide way more water than someone needs per year in a typical household."

Barrett works for the environmental group Upstate Forever, which held a workshop this summer to educate people on how to use a rain barrel. Barrett said he got enough money to make about 30 of the rain barrels. More than 100 people signed up.

"It has been met with overwhelming success," he said.

Barrett said one inch of rainwater collected on the roof of a 1,000-square foot house can produce 600 gallons. By using a home's gutters and downspout, he said it's easy to fill up the rain barrel, which he has mounted on cinderblocks under his downspout. Screens and a mosquito "doughnut" take care of bugs, he said, and a spigot at the bottom of the barrel allows easy access to the water, which he said is naturally soft and loved by plants.

Laura Ringo, a Spartanburg nonprofit director, said she placed a rain barrel underneath a gully on her roof. The home, she said, is in a historic neighborhood and no gutters are allowed. She and her husband are renovating the house and decided earlier this year that they could do more to collect rainwater for outdoor use.

"So far it's worked really well," she said. "We figured out where to put it to capture as much rain as possible. We've used it to do most of our watering of our new bushes and ferns and potted plants."

Stapleton sells more elaborate systems, which can include filters so that homes can use the rainwater in kitchens and elsewhere.

He said such systems are widely used in the arid part of west Texas, which may only get 15 to 20 inches of rain in a year.

"These people are drinking it, showering in it," he said. "They have no other water source."

Even in the drought, Stapleton said South Carolina still receives about 50 inches of rain annually.

He said rainwater harvesting also is growing in the Atlanta area, where developers are expecting some type of rainwater collection requirement for new development within five years as a result of water problems there.

Rainwater collection and use also is growing among businesses, he said.

Commercial users can collect huge amounts of water because of the size of their buildings, he said. Rainwater is perfect to use for industrial cleaning needs, Stapleton said, so that businesses are not using tap water merely to wash equipment

Residential cistern systems can range in price from \$3,000 to \$10,000, depending on their size, whether the systems are buried or use an above-ground tank and whether they are filtering water for drinking, Stapleton said. Barrett said the retail cost for rain barrels range from about \$80 to \$500, depending on what they are made of, their decoration and any filters placed on them.

Stapleton said cisterns offer the same financial incentives as solar energy, where users pay an upfront installation cost, then recoup the charge over the years because they save on utility fees.

He said harvesting rainwater also is more dependable than wells, since drillers cannot guarantee they will strike water or find the desired water flow.

"With rainwater, there's a guarantee backed up by statistical data from the 1940s," he said. "If you're well does dry up, there are other alternatives other than fleeing your home."
