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## It's Spring. Do You Know Where Your Rainbarrel Is?

Kathy Connolly

Pop quiz: When should we set up rain barrels?

- a) Early spring, in case rain grows sparse
- b) Summer, when plants need lots of water
- c) Fall, when we need to encourage root growth.
- d) All of the above

There are no wrong answers, of course. In fact, there are even more reasons to collect rainwater than those listed above.

“Rainwater is the preferred beverage of all plants,” according to Beverly O’Keefe, a.k.a. the Rhode Island Water Lady ([www.RIWaterLady.com](http://www.RIWaterLady.com)). “It is well oxygenated and naturally distilled,” she says. “It isn’t chemically treated, so the water’s pH isn’t artificially elevated.”

O’Keefe offers repurposed 60-gallon food barrels at her rain barrel store, which is open on Saturday mornings (and by appointment) throughout the growing season in Richmond, Rhode Island. The food-grade barrels are UV-stabilized, drilled with the appropriate outlets, outfitted with spigots, and available in three colors. She also sells accessories such as downspout diverters.

O’Keefe’s business started as a project with the University of Rhode Island Master Gardeners in 2006, but today goes on because O’Keefe believes these simple appliances are an important addition to dry summer landscapes.

“Once they’ve successfully collected some rain, many people become fans. I usually recommend one barrel to start. Learn how it works—and doesn’t work—and then make the necessary modifications to make it work for your landscape,” says O’Keefe.

After initial success, “People explore how to distribute the water,” she says. “You might use the water on container gardens next to the barrel. It’s also easy to fill watering cans from the barrel as long as the spigot is high enough.”

Gravity pressures the water through hoses, even soaker hoses. Drip irrigation hoses, however, are a separate matter.

“Small electric pond pumps with low GPH (gallons pumped per hour) can be used to move water through drip hoses to where it is needed,” says O’Keefe. “The pumps cost between \$10 to \$50 at local garden centers.” Pumps come in several styles, from plug-in to battery-operated models,

solar pumps, and hand-operated push pumps.

Personally, I have experimented with rain barrels for 20 years. I place them under downspouts, but also in gardens—far away from the roof. They capture rain from the open sky and I fill them from the well, too, during the wet season. That way, water is convenient to the plants.

I also put barrels outside both kitchen doors, where I collect clean water from kitchen activities. (The water must be free of oil, salt, or residue from meat or fish.)

Indeed, rain barrels can be placed almost anywhere in the landscape—except the deck or porch.

“A 60-gallon model weighs 420 pounds when full,” says O’Keefe. “Aside from the stress created by weight, the overflow water may damage the decking.”

Some people have other safety concerns about rain barrels, such as mosquitoes.

“Your first line of defense against mosquitoes is the lid,” says O’Keefe. “Also, put a tablespoon of oil and dish soap in the tank. It won’t hurt plants, and it will prevent larvae from developing. Mosquito ‘dunks’ work, too.”

O’Keefe says that a well- designed rain barrel uses only resin materials that are EPA-approved for food; the material will not leach into the contents. Good rain barrels are made in opaque, darker colors (but not black). White or clear barrel material can allow light into the barrel, heating the water and allowing algae and bacteria to grow.

As for freshness, O’Keefe says, “Water in a rain barrel remains fresh and usable unless it stagnates, especially if it accumulates pollen, debris, or bird droppings.”

In other words, use the water and don’t let it sit too long.

“You can avoid debris by closing the barrel during the ‘first wash,’ the first 15 minutes of early spring rain or after a long dry spell,” she says. “That allows the rain to flush accumulated debris off the roof. After the first wash, open the downspout diverter again and resume collecting.”

Some people worry that the standard rain barrel won’t fit in with the appearance of their home or neighborhood.

“It is always possible to ‘decorate up’ the rain barrel,” says O’Keefe.

You can paint barrels with acrylic, enamel, or plastic fusion spray paints as well as a simple black Sharpie pen. O’Keefe has seen artists incorporate stickers, stencils, or plant leaves in the overall design.

“There are several YouTube videos to help give the artist ideas,” she says.

If you’re looking for something more formal, there are “dressed up” models today from companies such as Gardener’s Supply ([www.gardeners.com](http://www.gardeners.com)). There are “fun” models, such as repurposed whiskey barrels ([www.rainbarrelsandmore.com/oakrainbarrels.html](http://www.rainbarrelsandmore.com/oakrainbarrels.html)).

Plain or fancy, it's always nice to have water near plants.

Rainbarrels, anyone?

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