

June 21, 2008

Use rain and gray water for garden by recycling

As I'm writing this, it's been more than two weeks since it has rained on my garden. Showers were predicted last week, and maybe they fell somewhere, but not in my neighborhood. Even though meteorologist Bobby Boyd at the National Weather Service's Nashville office has said that this summer probably won't be a repeat of last year's heat and drought, it's starting to feel uncomfortably dry around the tomato plants and the basil. The cucumbers are a little slow in climbing up the trellis this year.

And yet, I'm determined to be more diligent about water conservation. Turning on the spigot every day to power the overhead sprinkler in the garden is a waste of good water. It's time to think about using some of that extra water that usually gurgles down the drain during daily domestic tasks, and to install a rain barrel to take advantage of the free water that runs off the roof when it rains.

"The benefits of a rain barrel are that you're recycling the water, and you're saving money," says Brooke Seigle, program and events coordinator for the Cumberland River Compact, the nonprofit group dedicated to enhancing the quality of the Cumberland River Watershed. As part of its mission, the group teaches water conservation techniques at its Web site (www.cumberlandrivercompact.org) and through workshops and other events.

Reuse water

Reclamation of gray water — the used water from laundry, dishwashing, showers and sinks — seems like a daunting task for most households, suggesting special plumbing and filtration, or at least attention to what's in the water that's being poured onto the garden.

It's easier to collect and use the fresh water that usually runs down the drain while waiting for the hot water to kick in at the kitchen faucet, or for the shower to warm up. The irrigation delivery system, in this case, would be buckets carried from the house out to the garden. The biggest hurdle may be getting the whole family to buy into the system — especially when it means hauling water from the upstairs showers.

That's why the idea of using a rain barrel is so attractive. Rain runs off the roof, down a gutter spout and into the barrel, and a hose delivers water to the garden at the turn of a spigot. Better still, this is water that may be better for plants, since it has not been treated.

"The water is not drinkable, but the plants love it," Seigle says. "Certain types of flowers will really thrive with rainwater."

Learn all about it

The Cumberland River Compact is sponsoring a series of rain barrel workshops. The next one is 1 p.m. Thursday and again at 10 a.m. Aug. 9 at Warner Park Nature Center. Cost is \$35 and includes a rain barrel. (To reserve a spot, call 352-6299). They will also hold a workshop July 19 at Shelby Bottoms Nature Center (call 862-8539 to register).

For those who are considering recycling gray water from bathtubs, sinks, showers and so forth for use on the garden, here's a little information from the Web site of the University of Massachusetts Extension, prepared by plant and soil sciences professor Allen V. Barker and graduate student Jean E. English:

- Use gray water carefully, because it contains bits of personal and household detritus: grease, detergent, food particles, hair, cosmetics and so forth. Use water from the shower and bathtub first, followed by water from the bathroom sink, utility sink, washing machine, kitchen sink and dishwasher (but remember that water from the kitchen may contain a larger proportion of grease and food particles).
- Soaps and detergents can cause a buildup of undesirable substances in soil over time, so consider alternating gray water with fresh water or rainwater.
- To be safe, you may want to use gray water for ornamental plants only, and fresh water or rainwater on plants you will eat. If you must use gray water on food plants, only use it on plants whose edible portions are above-ground.
- Gray water is alkaline, so don't use it on acid-loving plants, such as azaleas.

