

Rainwater Catchment: It is More Than Tanks and Rain Barrels

I recently attended a local conference on land management. One of the speakers was Billy Kniffen. Billy had a career with the AgriLife Extension Service, most recently in Menard. Although he retired a few years ago, he was asked to come back to be AgriLife's rainwater catchment spokesman and expert, which he certainly is.

I have known Billy for over a dozen years and have always found him to be one of the most friendly, helpful, knowledgeable people on all sorts of topics related to land management. He is certainly an enthusiastic advocate of rainwater harvesting and conservation in all of its forms, and I was certainly not disappointed.

Let me start with some basic facts about rainwater catchment. A one-inch rain falling on 1000 square feet (about 32 feet x 32 feet) amounts to 600 gallons of water. An average 2000 sq. ft. house can easily have a 2500 sq. ft. roof footprint which can capture 1500 gallons of water in a 1-inch rain. Even in a dry year of only 20 inches of rain, that still amounts to 30,000 gallons of water or about 82 gallons a day. Many of us easily use less than that amount of water every day.

I know at least half a dozen families who have no well or other source of water other than their rainwater catchment system, and who have never run out of water in the many years they have relied only on rainwater. And that includes the drought of 2011!

But one of the main points Kniffen made in his presentation was that rainwater catchment is much more than just the tanks and plumbing. It is also partly a state of mind as well as a desire to capture and use every drop of precious water in the most efficient way possible. And there are lots of little things everyone, including those living on a city lot, can practice.

One example Billy showed was a photo of a part of his house that has a small roof over a porch which is not part of the main rainwater catchment system. There was a small gutter on the roof, but instead of a downspout, he hung a rain chain (a decorative chain that water runs down during a rain) which led into a pretty decorative ceramic flower pot which sat at the corner of the porch. He then attached small drip tubing to the base of the flower pot which led to some plants along the side of the house.

So when it rains, instead of water just running off the roof or down a downspout onto a sidewalk, the water gets diverted to the base of some plants where it can do some good and not be wasted. The point is there are many ways to capture otherwise wasted water and use it for our benefit and many of those ways can actually be very attractive and very inexpensive.

Moving up to a slightly larger amount of water catchment, there are many ways to use rain barrels. They range from a single rain barrel under a gutter with a permanent hose directing the water to a specific place where the water is needed, to a gang of several rain barrels all connected to drip tubing to feed water to flower beds or shrubs or trees. All of these things catch water which would otherwise be wasted running into the street

and contributing to stormflow. Using this free water in useful ways saves otherwise expensive city water. (By the way, UGRA subsidizes the purchase of rain barrels!)

And then there are things called rain gardens. These are places where water that would otherwise flow off the land faster than it can be absorbed, is instead slowed down in slight depressions in the landscape. Water is directed to flow into an area filled with porous soil and which contains moisture-loving plants that would otherwise not grow well in the area.

The point is, for those in the city as well as those in the country, anything you can do to better utilize the water that falls on your roof that would otherwise become storm runoff, and to save the use of domestic water in the process, is a good thing. And there are many such ways to do it. You can Google rain gardens and rain barrels for ideas.

Until next time...

Jim Stanley is a Texas Master Naturalist and the author of the books "Hill Country Landowner's Guide" and "A Beginner's Handbook for Rural Texas Landowners: How to Live in the Country Without Spoiling It." He can be reached at jstmn@kctc.com. Previous columns can be seen at www.hillcountrynaturalist.org.