

Massachusetts Master Gardener Association

FACT SHEET



Have Gardening Questions? The **Master Gardener Help Line Hours** are 10 a.m. – 2 p.m. on Fridays (all year) as well as Wednesdays (March-November) and Mondays (April-October).

Phone: 617-933-4929 Email: mghelpline@masshort.org.

Rain Barrel 101

Have you ever thought of how much water falls on your roof every time it rains? Of course, you've carefully directed your downspouts to send the water away from the house, out into your lawn and garden, perhaps even out to a rain garden to make better use of it. But wouldn't it be nice to save that water for a time when it's not raining and your plants need a drink? That's what a rain barrel does for you.

A rain barrel is a drum, usually plastic, which collects the water coming down your gutter and holds it for use later. Properly constructed, a single rain barrel can capture over 1000 gallons of water during the growing season! It will collect even more if you connect two or more barrels together to take advantage of heavy downpours or set up multiple collection sites around your home.

Did you know rain water is better for your plants than treated municipal water from a tap? Rain water is soft water, without chlorine or other chemicals that your plants don't need or want. A rain barrel will last many years, paying for itself in water saved while allowing you to grow your garden in a green, environmentally-friendly way. Rain barrels can help reduce your garden chores. Attach a soaker hose to the rain barrel, and a garden can be watered as easily as turning on the spigot when the soil is dry.

So where do you get a rain barrel? Some towns sell them at a discount. You can also find them in gardening catalogs and websites, or you can make your

own. The prices range from under \$20 for the simplest homemade unit to more than \$100 for the fancier catalog models. They all do the job.

How do you construct a rain barrel? Start with a food-grade plastic barrel, clean the interior very well with bleach and soap, and then rinse with vinegar and water. Cut a 6-inch hole in the top with a saber saw. Use epoxy glue to attach window screen to the underside of the hole. (This will keep out debris, mosquitoes and other insects.) Drill a 5/8-inch hole 3 to 4 inches from the bottom of the barrel. Drill a second 5/8-inch hole 4 to 5 inches from the top. Twist a 3/4 inch brass faucet into each hole and seal with a bead of silicone caulking around each tap.

Create a steady, sturdy base for the barrel with cement blocks placed close together near your downspout. (Remember you are relying on gravity to get the water out, so the height is important.) Remove the elbow from your downspout, and using a hacksaw, shorten the downspout so it ends above your rain barrel. Replace the elbow, positioning it so rainwater is directed into the hole. Attach one hose to the lower tap for watering plants, and another to the top tap to act as an overflow. Be certain the overflow hose will carry water three feet or more away from the house. Now you are ready for rain! Maintenance consists of keeping the screen free of debris in the summer and emptying it and storing it dry (so freezing water doesn't damage the barrel) during the winter.

The Massachusetts Master Gardener Association is a non-profit organization whose mission is to share knowledge and experience with the public through outreach programs in education, horticulture and gardening; to provide the Master Gardener Training Program to interested members of the public; and to provide graduates of the Master Gardener Training Program with educational and practical opportunities to extend their knowledge and interests in gardening and related topics. <http://www.massmastergardeners.org/>