

SPLASH INTO EXTENSION

If interested in learning more about rainwater harvesting, check out one of the newest University of Nebraska – Lincoln Extension NebGuides titled “Rainwater Harvesting in Residential-Scale Landscapes (G2148)” written by Kelly Feehan, UNL Extension Horticulture Educator.



As we have experienced this year, rainfall in Nebraska is often more sparse than abundant. Because water is an important resource that needs to be conserved, rainwater harvesting is a growing trend.

Benefits of Rainwater Harvesting

Rainwater harvesting treats rainwater as a resource to be collected rather than a waste product to be conveyed away as quickly as possible. Collected rainwater can be diverted to planted areas such as rain gardens for infiltration or temporarily held in a storage device like a rain barrel or cistern for future use.

Rainwater harvesting maximizes the environmental and landscape value of rainwater. If more rainwater was infiltrated when it is received, this could increase soil moisture and extend the period of time between irrigation. If rainwater were collected and temporarily stored for later use to irrigate ornamental plants, drinking water from taps would be conserved.

Techniques for Harvesting Rainwater

Harvesting or recycling rainwater can be as simple as redirecting downspouts onto planted areas and away from driveways or sidewalks to installing a rain barrel or rain garden. It can be as advanced as installing underground cisterns to capture rainfall from rooftops for reuse in landscape irrigation to installing a permeable driveway or patio so more rain can soak in and less run off.

The old thinking has been to move rainwater off of a property as quickly as possible. The new thinking is to capture and soak it in. While it is important for water to drain away from building foundations, there are few reasons why this important resource cannot be conserved through rainwater harvesting methods and its value maximized in landscapes.

Some rain does soak into lawns and landscape beds but because of impermeable surfaces like paved driveways and compacted soils we often try to grow lawns on, large amounts of rainwater does run off.

For water conservation, rain barrels and cisterns are making a comeback. Rain gardens are becoming the newest landscape feature. Tall berms that shed rain rather than soak in rain are being reduced in size, used to channel water onto planted areas and away from paved areas, or being used as part of rain gardens to capture and soak in rainwater.

Improving soils with organic matter is on the rise. This helps increase infiltration of water into soil reducing the amount that runs off compacted soil. Homeowners may begin to pay more attention to lawn irrigation systems to avoid overwatering which causes soils to remain saturated so rainwater tends to run off rather than soak in.