



Rain Barrel and Rain Garden Myth Busters

Think you know everything about rain barrels and rain gardens? Think again. Below are some common myths and the truths behind the tales.

Myth: Chicagoans don't have to worry about conserving water because Lake Michigan has an infinite supply of water.

Truth: The Great Lakes are an international treasure – it's our responsibility to protect and conserve them. The City of Chicago and the surrounding suburbs use over 800 million gallons of water a day from Lake Michigan. It takes energy to treat and deliver that potable (drinking) water to our taps – further exacerbating climate change and air pollution. Overuse and climate change threaten to further lower lake levels, which can result in ecosystem imbalance.

Myth: Rain barrels are only available in one color.

Truth: Rain barrels can be found in different colors including blue, green, black, and brown. You can also buy paint for plastic surfaces to decorate your barrel. Ask your local hardware store for paint suggestions.

Myth: Rain barrels create a habitat for mosquitoes.

Truth: Properly designed and maintained rain barrels will **not** become a habitat for mosquitoes if a few precautions are taken: 1) Use the water. If the rain barrel water is used often, the water will not have a chance to become stagnant. 2) Make sure the barrels have a screen or netting to prevent the intrusion of mosquitoes. 3) Ensure there is enough permeable surfaces surrounding the barrel so that barrel overflow does not result in standing water that lasts for more than 72 hours.

Myth: Rain barrels will flood my yard.

Truth: Many Chicago residents find that their rain barrels often overflow, but do not flood, if properly placed. In special cases, for some barrels, diverters can be purchased that will direct overflow back to the sewer. It is best to place the barrel on a permeable surface that allows water to filter through the ground and in an area that slopes away from the building.

Myth: Rain barrels are permanent.

Truth: Rain barrels can be removed easily. When you disconnect the downspout, hold on to the piece you remove so that you can reconnect it, if you remove the barrel. During the winter, rain barrels should be drained and stored indoors (or turned upside down) to prevent water collecting and freezing in the barrel.

Myth: Rain gardens attract mosquitoes.

Truth: Mosquitoes won't find rain gardens to be good breeding areas because if a rain garden is properly constructed, the water will drain within 24 hours (but usually within an hour or two). Mosquito larvae need over 3 days to develop.

Myth: Rain gardens look like weed patches.

Truth: If properly designed and maintained, rain gardens can look like a beautiful, intentional garden. Choose plants with different colors, heights, and bloom times and get tips from your local garden center on design. "Cues to care" such as a rock-lined borders, attractive fencing, or bird houses can help give the rain garden a more planned and maintained look.

Sources: City of Chicago, Guide to Stormwater Management –

www.cityofchicago.org/content/dam/city/depts/doe/general/NaturalResourcesAndWaterConservation_PDFs/Water/guideToStormwaterBMP.pdf

City of Chicago, Water Agenda – www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/water/provdrs/commis/svcs/wateragenda.html



Know Your Rain Barrel and Rain Garden Facts

Rain barrels and rain gardens are important tools for urban stormwater management. Did you know ...

- ❖ Seventy percent of the Earth is covered by water. Nearly 97% of that water is saltwater and undrinkable. That means that only about 3% of the Earth's water is fresh. 2% of that fresh water (about 66% of all fresh water) is in solid form and found in ice caps and glaciers. That leaves about **.5% of all the Earth's water** in a form useable to humans and land animals.
- ❖ When it rains in a natural, undisturbed environment, about **50% of rainwater infiltrates** into the ground, 40% evaporates or is taken up by plants, and only about 10% runs off the surface. In areas that are primarily impervious (Chicago is 65%), the majority of rainfall becomes runoff, and infiltration is **less than 1/3** of what it was prior to development.
- ❖ A large portion of the water we use at home is spent on **watering our lawns and gardens** during hot summer months. Instead of using water from the tap, which requires energy and money to treat and deliver to our homes, we can use a rain barrel to collect and store rainwater from our roofs through a disconnected downspout.
- ❖ During heavy rains, the sewer system can become too full, causing untreated combined sewage to both back up into basements and flow into the river system (this is called a **combined sewer overflow**, or CSO). Keeping stormwater out of the sewers, by disconnecting your downspout and directing to permeable (e.g. landscaped) areas, helps to prevent basement back-ups and CSOs.
- ❖ Rain gardens can be an aesthetically pleasing tool to promote **absorption and infiltration** of stormwater runoff. The plants provide food and shelter for many birds and beneficial insects, such as dragonflies, which eat mosquitoes. Plants can include a combination of shrubs, grasses and flowering perennials where the soil medium is between 6 and 8 inches deep. Ideally, plants should consist of native wetland and prairie grasses, and wildflowers.



Sources: Chicago Climate Action Plan – www.chicagoclimateaction.org
Rain Garden Network – www.raingardennetwork.com

What resources are available in Chicago?

- ❖ The City of Chicago Department of Environment runs a Sustainable Backyard Program that hosts educational workshops across the city and provides rebates for rain barrels, compost bins, trees, and native plants during the growing season. When the program is not in session, you are still welcome to purchase any of these from your local garden center or hardware store and save your receipt to qualify for the next round of rebates. Visit www.cityofchicago.org/rainbarrel or call 311 for more information and workshop dates.
- ❖ To stay involved in the current local rain harvesting discussion, check out the Chicago Rain Harvesting Blog at www.chicagorainharvesting.wordpress.com.
- ❖ The Chicago Department of Water Management has a MeterSave program aimed at reducing water use (and bills!) in the home. Learn more at www.metersave.org or call 311.