



Photo courtesy of Kevin Soergel



Rain, Rain, Go Away?

Now you can harvest it for another day

By Phyllis Gricus

Nature doesn't create new water. It constantly recycles the same water that has existed on the planet since the beginning of time. Today though, this water cycle from stream, to cloud, to rain falling on the earth and replenishing our ground water supply, has been disrupted by our built environment, and affects both the quality of our water supply and its availability. Too much unabsorbed water during a rainstorm causes flooding as well as too little in the ground supply in times of drought. This is costly to our environment and civic economies. But there are ways to help restore the natural cycle within our own back yard that offer multiple benefits for our gardens and us.

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OPPOSITE: Water is used in many different ways including streams and ponds in the rainwater harvesting system. This stream was created by Soergel Aquascapes.

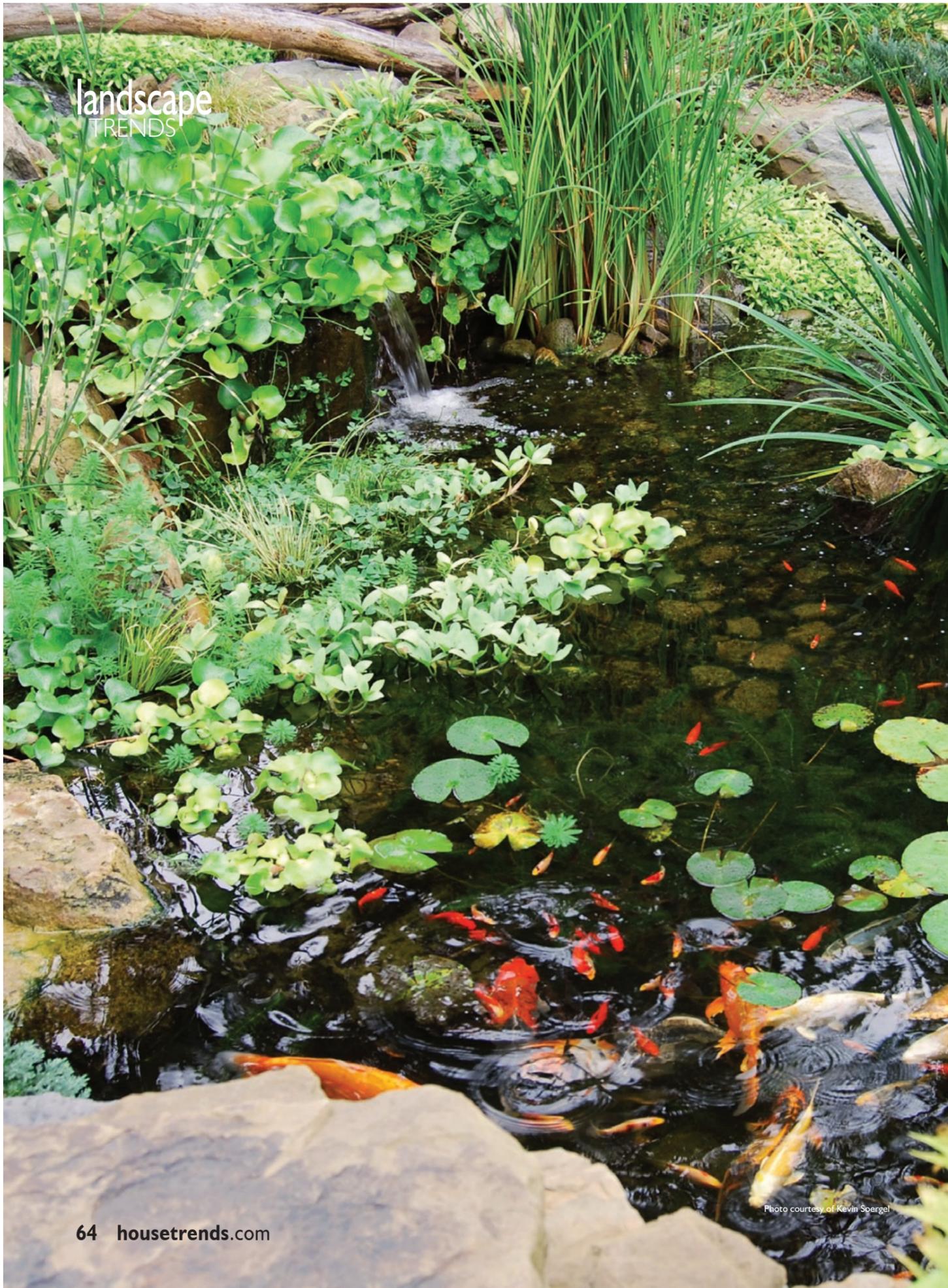


Photo courtesy of Kevin Soergel

Where does rain go?

In Southwestern Pennsylvania, our rivers and streams are overwhelmed with polluted stormwater and untreated sewage nearly every time it rains. Plants absorb some rainwater, to be sure. And some does infiltrate into the ground. Where there is ground. But impervious surfaces like our roofs, sidewalks and driveways shed water rapidly into the sewer system. Even the briefest shower can cause a deluge of raw sewage to overload the water treatment plant and flow directly into our rivers downstream.

To help stop this inundation, most communities within Allegheny County now require for the homeowner to disconnect downspouts from sewer lines. Several nonprofit agencies aligned with the water authority are attempting to educate homeowners on how they can comply and protect the watershed. But why not go further, turn a problem into an asset and use your runoff water to improve and beautify your landscape?

Rain barrels

The simplest way to collect rainwater is to install an inexpensive rain barrel. A rain barrel collects and stores rainwater from rooftops to use later. It attaches to your downspouts with a diverter designed to send water back down the drainpipe when the barrel is full.

A rain barrel will provide an abundant supply of chemical-free water that is ideal for watering gardens and flowerpots. You'll be surprised at how quickly it will fill up. A roof area of only 1,000 square feet can provide approximately 600 gallons of water during a one-inch rainfall. So you may decide to install more than one at various locations around your home. Rain barrels can be set up to slowly release water through a soaker hose placed in a garden bed, or drained out a regular hose for daily watering needs.

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TOP: The three-tiered water element at Beechwood Farms Nature Reserve in Fox Chapel, PA, demonstrates the function of pervious pavers. ABOVE: A 2,000-gallon containment tank sits under the patio and provides the water used for irrigation of the native plant sales area. BELOW: The ever-flowing bird bath is a component of a Complete Aquatics Sustain Rain, rain garden. The crates underground filter and store the water while the pump circulates the water that supplies the bird bath and soaker hoses used for irrigation during dry periods.

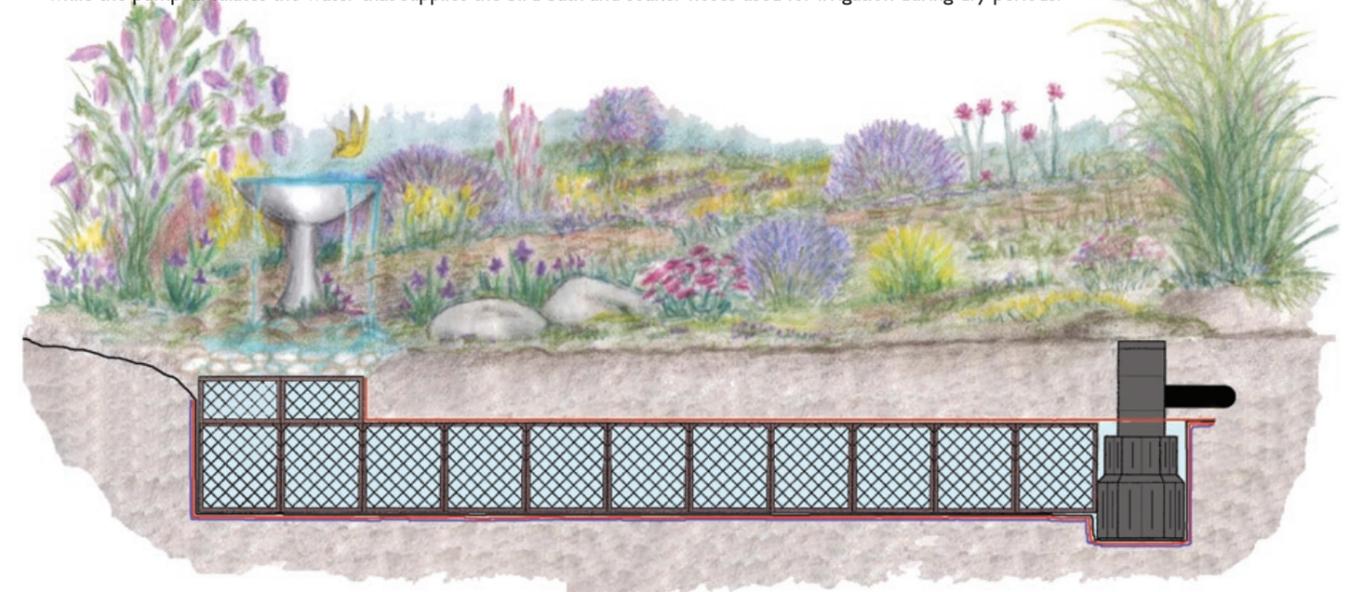


Photo courtesy of Complete Aquatics

Rain gardens

A rain garden is a planted depression designed to gather rainfall and stormwater as it travels downhill. Plant selection is largely composed of flowering perennials and grasses, together with scattered shrubs chosen to withstand extremes of moisture. Native plants are often the first choice because they offer the best sustenance for birds and butterflies. The rain garden serves as a small bioretention cell in which stormwater is cleaned and reduced in volume once it enters. For more details on how to build a rain garden, visit the Rain Garden Alliance website or consult a landscape professional.

Harvesting systems

Rainwater harvesting systems take a holistic approach to managing and capturing rainwater. The entire designed landscape becomes a rain garden. All of the individual components are integrated with the home's hard surfaces to capture, filter and store water for landscape irrigation. Hardscapes such as patios and walkways constructed of permeable material also become part of the naturally functioning ecosystem.

The key to creating your rain harvesting system is to understand the amount of water you both receive and use throughout the year, advises Joel Kammeraad, with Complete Aquatics. Then build your system to accommodate your needs.

Scott Rudolph of Fallingwaters Inc. says that rainwater harvesting is one of the easiest ways for a homeowner to have an impact on their water bill and be a responsible citizen. Increasing your soil's capacity to retain water for your plants will be important. Incorporating organic matter and coarse diatomaceous earth for all of your plantings, including your lawn, will greatly decrease your watering needs.

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BELOW: Water elements are both pleasing and functional, providing the necessary aeration to the stored water. **OPPOSITE:** Container plantings serve as mini rain gardens when placed anywhere in your garden.



Photo courtesy of Aquascape Inc.



Photo courtesy of Kevin Soergel

Kevin Soergel of K.P. Soergel & Associates is a landscape architect who has been implementing water-harvesting principles in his designs, using an existing slope to direct the water flow from a patio with impervious pavers to a collection basin or a planted rain garden. Proving that it is possible to add water-retaining enhancements to an established landscape.

Reaping your harvest

Our view of water is changing: it is no longer in unlimited, cheap supply. And we are more aware of stormwater as a destructive force particularly in our developed environments. Adopting any of the water saving practices discussed is another step towards each of us being good environmental stewards of the earth, starting in our own back yards. 🌱

Phyllis Gricus is owner of Landscape Design Studio in Pittsburgh, PA and specializes in environmentally sound gardening.

BELOW: Not a pretty picture is it? This is what stormwater overflow looks like in your street.



Photo courtesy of John Moyer,
Nine Mile Run Watershed Association

Enter to Win Your Own Rain Barrel!

Collecting rainwater is a great way to reduce your eco-footprint, save money and provide a good source of water for your plants and flowers. Rainwater harvesting systems are relatively easy to set up and maintain.



Photo courtesy of Fiskars®

But one lucky *Housetrends* reader can get started for **FREE!**

The contest winner will receive a Fiskars® Tuscany 57-gallon Rain Barrel System with worry-free downspout diverter kit, built-in base, cover, and threaded spigot for easy soaker hose attachment. For product details visit: www.rain-barrel.com/tuscanyspicegranite.html.

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No purchase necessary to enter or win the prize. Void where prohibited. Limit one entry per person per household/e-mail address throughout the duration. • The estimated odds of winning will depend upon the total number of eligible entries received. The prize is a 57-gallon Fiskars® Tuscany Rain Barrel System with an approximate retail value of \$100. One winner will be randomly selected from all entries on April 1, 2010 and will be notified by email on or before April 9, 2010. The winner will be asked to provide a mailing address for prize shipment. • For complete contest details, visit housetrends.com and search RainBarrel. Enter today!