

10 ENVIRONMENTAL SOLUTIONS • Bangor Daily News Special Advertising Section • April 21, 2023

## HOW-TO:

# RAINWATER IRRIGATION

BY STEPHANIE BOUCHARD

**K**eeping your garden watered doesn't mean you have to have a high water bill or drain your well. You can use rainwater and gray water to irrigate your garden instead.

### LET IT RAIN

Rain barrels are a mainstay of collecting and using rainwater for irrigation. They're pretty simple to set up and use, but they aren't perfect, says Kate Garland, a horticulturist with the University of Maine Cooperative Extension in Penobscot County. "We do have very unpredictable or unreliable rain events (so) we can't necessarily count on that natural rainfall to provide all our garden's water needs," she says.

It's often the case that rain barrels are full when water isn't needed and dry when water is needed. You can store water in rain barrels for a week or two, she says, but not for long periods due to concerns about contamination. That said, storage times can be extended if you take extra measures, such as putting a filter or screen over the barrel top, and keeping the barrels in a cool spot out of direct sunlight.

Other simple ways to use rain for garden irrigation include positioning gutter extenders so that water from your rooftop goes directly into your garden beds or creating shallow trenches, also called swales, to redirect excess rainwater. And you can take advantage of natural depressions in your landscape by planting a rain garden in those spots.

Since depending on rainwater is not a sure-fire way to keep your gardens watered, you can turn to another often overlooked supplemental water source: re-using your household water.

### GOING GRAY

Gray water, sometimes spelled grey, is untreated household "wastewater." It's the water that goes down the drain when you take a shower or bath, clean your dishes or hands in the sink, or wash your clothes in a washing machine. According to state wastewater regulations, toilet water cannot be used in a gray water system.

According to Greywater Action, a sustainable water usage advocate in California, gray water can contain food particles, hair, soap suds, and even some cleaning products or detergents (those that are plant-friendly), but it is not safe to drink. When used to irrigate gardens, it should not be poured directly on the leafy parts of plants. Instead, gray water should be directed to the roots of plants. This can be done by watering by hand or extending piping off your home's plumbing system.

The state allows gray water systems for irrigation, but it does have specific regulations for them. "Maine people may install gray wastewater systems without a license or certification," said Lindsay Hammes, the spokesperson for the Maine CDC in an email. "However, the systems must be designed by a site evaluator and the system must be permitted and inspected by the local plumbing inspector." You should also check with your municipality to see if it has any additional regulations.

Plumbing your entire house for a gray water system is an undertaking. Unless you are building a new house, it means rearranging piping in your home. However, there are more DIY-friendly options.

Probably the easiest thing to do is collect the water coming out of your sink, shower or tub faucets as you wait for the water coming out of the tap to warm up. Use a bucket or watering can to collect the water then walk it out of the house and simply pour it into the ground around your plants.

For more rainwater collection or gray water usage ideas, go to [greywateraction.org](http://greywateraction.org) or to the Maine Cooperative Extension website, [extension.umaine.edu](http://extension.umaine.edu).

