



Urban Times

ARCHIVES

FROM: JULY 2008



▲ The finished product: A rain barrel which collects water from downspouts, and features a tap which the homeowner can use to recycle the water.

The RAIN Barrel MAKERS

Water conservation
at heart of effort by
Cottage Home couple

BY LAURA HENDERSON

RAIN BARRELS ARE SIMPLE. IN short, you take a large barrel, drill a hole for a tap and a hole for overflow, cover the top with a lid that has a hole large enough for water from a downspout to come in, cover the hole with screening to prevent creating a mosquito breeding ground, set it up under a downspout and, *voila* - you have a rain barrel.

The most basic use of a rain barrel is to collect rainwater which can then be used to garden houseplants, gardens or lawns. Place the rain barrel under a downspout on a house, garage, shed, or other outbuilding. A 55-gallon barrel will fill in one good rain, which could provide enough water for your home garden for weeks during periods of limited to no rain.

After more than a year of talking about it, my husband, Tyler, and I finally decided in

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April to try making our own rain barrel. Tyler found basic instructions online, and a friend found a source for barrels. With the goal of eliminating use of city water on our approximately 300-square-foot urban vegetable garden this growing season, we have now made and set up four barrels around our house and garage. We like to call them our “pork belly barrels,” because the converted barrels are recycled from a life of transporting sausage casings in saltwater brine to Mariah Foods in Columbus, Ind.

Amazed by how easy the rain barrels were to make, Tyler took one to the Cottage Home Neighbor-to-Neighbor Market in April. We wanted to encourage other neighbors to take this simple step toward water conservation and reuse. Tyler offered to make a few more for a few neighbors for a small fee. “A few neighbors” has since grown into a small-scale rain-barrel production operation.

The demand has been staggering. As of June 11, we have made and sold or gifted 65 barrels, and we have requests for 25 more rain barrel purchases. Order requests have blossomed far beyond Cottage Home and the folks we know. We’ve had rain barrels purchased for homes in Noblesville, Zionsville, Carmel, Greenwood and even Seymour.

On June 8, we hosted a rain barrel-making workshop on behalf of the Cottage Home Green Team. Four couples and five individuals attended to learn how to make a rain barrel, where to place and how to install a rain barrel under a downspout, how to prevent mosquitoes from breeding in the rain barrel, how to mitigate algae growth inside the barrel, and how to use the rain barrel for watering. In total, nine rain barrels were made that day, and we all shared in an informative discussion of questions, concerns, experiences and observations.

Late in the workshop a passing neighbor stopped by and was able to answer one of the most controversial questions about watering from a rain barrel - can you use a soaker hose without either using a pump or significantly elevating the barrel? He had tried it and reported that the soaker hose had released water relatively evenly along the length of the hose. Tyler and I certainly gathered more knowledge and good ideas from the workshop experience as well, and we do hope to hold more rain barrel-making workshops in the future.



▲ Author Laura Henderson and her husband, Ty, in front of a stack of barrels awaiting conversion into useful rain barrels.



▲ Brian Deer cuts out the inflow lid hole during Ty Henderson’s recent rainbarrel workshop.



▲ Gabriele Roselli and Andrea Townley fit the screen lid.

We never imagined such avid and eager interest would follow the making of a few rain barrels. We never thought we’d be asked to include a few rain barrels in the “R-Value - Revive, Restore, Reuse” show at the Harrison Center for the Arts in May. We certainly never dreamed that everyone we talked to about the rain barrels would have some grand idea about how we could market the rain barrels or build a business. It has been fun and exciting to watch others become enthusiastic about making and using rain barrels, and we do hope to continue to spur this enthusiasm.

It was not and is not our motivation to become moguls of

a rain barrel empire. We just wanted to make our own to conserve a little water. Then, finding it a relatively easy production process, we thought we'd make a few more for people who really wanted them and would put them to good use in home gardens. Anyone who meets Tyler will have no doubt that his motivation to continue making them comes purely from the people who are so genuinely excited about having and using them. His goal is to find enough used food-grade barrels to make rain barrels as long as requests come to him. Not one more, not one less. He isn't interested in pursuing a website or marketing strategy or renting a space to make and store more for the possible market of green-washed America. If someone else wants to do that, they should.

My motivation has become a little more complicated. Without intending to sound grandiose, it is my hope that our rain barrels will not only help people conserve water, but also raise awareness of water as an important resource to preserve, educate others on ecological gardening practices, and serve as a fund raising opportunity, even if only to very small measure.

'For the Love of Water'

Just about the time the rain barrel project came along, I saw a documentary film called "FLOW - For The Love of Water." The film an eloquent, beautiful, terrifying, hopeful and tremendously motivating documentary which touches on various issues of the growing international water crisis. The film touches on issues that are directly relevant to every water-drinking individual in the United States, as well as issues that are easy for us to miss because they seem far away, are not often brought to our attention by the media, and are perhaps something most of us have never been stimulated to consider.

I was introduced to the film "FLOW" by my father, Darrell Adams. He works for an organization called Edge Outreach (www.edgeoutreach.com) that does water purification work, primarily in Central America. In January 2005, I had accompanied my father on a trip to Thailand to deliver and assist in the installation of three McGuire Water Purifiers (www.edgeoutreach.com/PureWater/PureLife/mcguirepurifier.html) in locations not serviced by safe drinking water infrastructure. I was amazed by the simplicity and affordability of the technology, and by the huge impact this basic system could have on an entire community.

We also had the opportunity to see a similar previously installed system successfully at work in a refugee camp on

Documentary to be shown on Saturday, July 12

THE INDIANAPOLIS PREMIERE OF "FLOW - FOR THE LOVE OF WATER" HAS been set for Saturday, July 12, in Earth House coffeehouse at Lockerbie Central United Methodist Church.

The event begins at 7 p.m. with a "Water Fair," described by organizer Laura Henderson as "a chance to learn about simple things you can do to help preserve our local water resources.

The screening of "Flow" will begin at 8 p.m. A discussion of local and international water issues will follow the documentary. The showing is free, although donations will be encouraged and accepted. For more about the documentary, see the website at www.flowthefilm.com.

Lockerbie Central United Methodist Church is located at the corner of East and New York streets in Lockerbie Square. ■

the Thai-Burmese border. The experience left a lasting impression on me, to say the least, and I have been considering ways to help raise awareness in my immediate community about the lack of safe drinking water faced by people all over the world. According to UNICEF, a child dies every fifteen seconds from disease due to unsafe drinking water, poor sanitation and hygiene. The World Health Organization reports that 80 percent of all sickness in the world is attributable to unsafe water and inadequate sanitation.

How does this relate to rain barrels? Quiet simply, I see rain barrels as an easy "gateway" discussion to make people more conscious of water consumption, and as an opportunity to raise money for local and international water work at the same time. As "FLOW" addresses far more eloquently than I, water is our most precious natural resource. Without water, there is no life. Here in Indianapolis, we have (relatively) safe, clean drinking water that is easily accessible from our home taps. It is easy for us to unintentionally take that for granted. Millions of people around the world do not, and truly thousands of people die every day due to this lack of access. Additionally, although we have easy, affordable access to potable water, we are far from free of critical risks facing our water supply. Our waterways and the ecosystems they support are threatened by pollution and the many demands we place on the water supply from agriculture to industry, lawn care to drinking water, swimming pools and summer play to showering and cleaning.

I am an informal networker, always looking for ways to weave people and ideas together, no matter how unrelated they may seem at first glance. So, envisioning the potential to connect small-scale local water conservation efforts with larger scale international water purification efforts, I suggested to Tyler that we could support both big and small efforts in protecting water resources with the sale of each rain barrel. He agreed, and we decided that 10 percent of rain barrel sales (that is selling price, not profit after costs) would be given to support local and international clean water efforts. From each barrel sold to a Cottage Home neighbor or through a Cottage Home event, 10 percent goes to the Cottage Home Neighborhood Association to support

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projects of the Cottage Home Green Team and efforts to adopt the section of the Pogue's Run waterway that streams through the neighborhood. Ten percent of "outside" (non Cottage Home) sales goes to Edge Outreach's Pure Water, Pure Life program. Edge Outreach (www.edgeoutreach.com) is a truly grass-roots started non-profit, non-governmental organization working to provide safe drinking water access to communities, primarily in Central America, currently living the world's water crisis.

Of course rain barrels are not going to solve the world water crisis, and our little effort is not going to raise thousands of dollars for the efforts we hope to support. However, every simple step each of us can take toward developing a more informed and responsible relationship with our personal water usage is a step worth taking.

With the help of Herron-Morton resident Chris Harrell, I have received permission to organize a public screening of "FLOW - For The Love of Water," a 2008 Sundance Film Festival selected documentary. The film will be screened on Saturday, July 12, at Lockerbie Central United Methodist Church (see related article on page xx.)

Discussions with Gwyneth Sutherland and John Clark of Provoke.org have enlightened ways of connecting the event and attendees with local organizations doing work to clean up and preserve Indiana's waterways as well. We hope to have representatives of these organizations at the event to discuss ways we as Indianapolis residents can take small and large steps to care for our local waterways. We also hope to have a representative from Edge Outreach at the premier to talk about the water purification work done by Edge volunteer groups. To learn more, to volunteer to help with the event, to recommend a local water related organization, or to become a financial sponsor to the costs involved in presenting FLOW in Indianapolis, please contact me at leahenders@yahoo.com or 332-6334. ■

Laura and Tyler Henderson are residents and active neighborhood association members of Cottage Home. Laura teaches yoga and Pilates in Downtown Indy, and Tyler works for the Study Abroad Foundation in Indianapolis and Bocconi University in Milan, Italy. They can be contacted at tyandleah@yahoo.com.