From the Potting Shed…

I am sad. All of this rain and only 1 of my 4 rain barrels is collecting water. The reasons range from the need for a new paint job to the installation of new gutters to a winter tragedy that has left me heartbroken and wondering how to repurpose a rain barrel that can no longer hold water because I simply can’t bear to get rid of it. With all of the rain we’ve had you may think saving it up isn’t really necessary but we all know that Mother Nature can turn off the spigot in an instant. Although to be fair, some might say it’s because I have a thing for rain barrels and I have to admit maybe I do and you can read all about my secret passion in the article below.

I am inspired. I’m just back from the Extension Master Gardener State Conference held at the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum. We heard from expert speakers and networked with Master Gardeners from other counties. We were introduced to a new online training tool about the healing power of nature and heard from researchers about the latest studies into this powerful idea. We also attended advanced and hands on sessions about insects, trees and landscape design. If this sounds like your idea of fun perhaps you should join us by becoming a Master Gardener. The application process starts in September so stay tuned.

Finally, I am excited. Registration for our Fall Education Event – Autumn Gardening: A Season of Change is now open! Spend a day at the historic Oliver Kelley Farm learning about a variety of gardening topics. You can find more information below in What’s Coming Up with the Sherburne County Master Gardeners. We hope to see you there!

Get gardening and get growing,
The Sherburne County Master Gardeners

Bitten by the Rain Barrel Bug

Containers and hanging baskets require almost daily watering and dragging the hose around quickly becomes a hassle. For me, filling a watering can with a hose created other problems. My kids wanted to help and filling the watering cans usually ended in yells, tears and wet clothes. If I took charge of the hose and gave them the watering cans, it resulted in haphazard watering. Intrigued by an article about rain barrels I wondered if that might be a solution. Besides, I thought it would look cute in my garden. The next year end bonus from work didn’t get spent on family or any of the other things you should do with it. Instead I purchased a pair of well designed and well made rain barrels complete with a special shipping charge. I affectionately refer to these as the Twins and they have worked beautifully ever since. And that was the start of my passion for rain barrels.
A few years later I inherited another rain barrel from someone who was moving. I started calling it Frankenbarrel simply because it ended up being a creature of uncertain origins, with cobbled together parts that required repeated modification and tinkering. It was a barrel that had been repurposed and I had no idea how it had been connected to the previous owner’s downspout. Over the years, my many attempts and failures to make Frankenbarrel work right have challenged me and taught me more than a normal person should know about rain barrels, gutters, plumbing, and the physics of water. So here is your chance to learn all about rain barrels the easy way and perhaps come to understand why I am so fond of them.

**WHY WOULD I WANT A RAIN BARREL?**

Plants love rainwater. The water hasn’t gone through a treatment facility or water softener so it doesn’t have extra minerals and salts which can be troublesome for plants. I know at least one person who uses rainwater for their houseplants. It’s free so it saves on your water bill. Even though I have a well and septic and no monthly bill, the cost of digging a new well scares me. For those on city water, there are no watering restrictions with a rain barrel. With so many threats to our existing water resources, free water in a rain barrel is an environmental win-win. They’re convenient. I’ve already mentioned all of the baggage and drama when dragging a hose around, especially on a deck. A 50 gallon barrel fills in almost no time and even the smallest shower can refill your barrel so you almost always have free water whenever you need it. Kids love to help when they can fill a watering can and water plants themselves. I’ve even seen people hook a barrel up to a soaker hose or small drip irrigation system. Yes, I like the look of a rain barrel in my garden; it really does look kind of cute. Since you never know when Mother Nature will turn off the showers, a rain barrel gives me alternatives.

**WHAT KIND OF A WATER BARREL SHOULD I GET?**

The options are endless. There are so many styles, shapes and colors it’s easy to find one that fits with your garden style. You can either purchase a new one or repurpose a plastic barrel. Or you can find one at a garage sale like I did last year. Regardless of what you get, there are some things you should look for in a rain barrel. If you buy a new rain barrel that was specifically manufactured to be a rain barrel, all is good. It’s the right kind of plastic and it hasn’t been used for storing some other substance. Repurposing a plastic barrel is a fantastic way to make a rain barrel. It saves all that plastic from the landfill and hopefully saves you some money. If you are repurposing a barrel, it needs to be made of food grade plastic and its original use had to be for the storage of food suitable for human consumption. Do not use a barrel that has held motor oil, solvents, coolants, fertilizers, pesticides, etc. These chemicals can be absorbed into the plastic and then leach back out into the water. This is not safe for either you or your plants. If you repurpose a barrel you can find conversion kits which have diverters, spigots and all the other fittings you need to convert a plastic barrel into a water collecting wonder. You can buy all those things individually, but I think the kits are so much easier. I wish they had been around years ago when I was tinkering with Frankenbarrel, it would have saved me more than a few headaches. Whether you are buying new or repurposing a barrel look for metal fittings, preferably brass, that will hold up to Minnesota winters. Some rain barrels have a spigot about 12 inches from the bottom with a drain plug at the very bottom. Others have a hole at the very bottom and use a small hose to fill watering cans. Consider what works best for your watering habits.

**WHERE DO I PUT A RAIN BARREL?**

Water gets into a rain barrel by directing all or some of the water in a downspout into the barrel so it needs to be near a downspout. When installing your rain barrel, remember that your gutters, downspouts and extensions are designed to move water from your roof and away from the foundation of your house. A rain barrel should not interfere with that. Rain barrels are gravity fed systems. The fuller the barrel, the more water pressure you will have at the bottom of the barrel. Some people put their rain barrels up on stands, usually 8 to 12 inches high. The higher the barrel sits, the stronger the gravity, the stronger the pressure and flow that is coming out of the barrel. Many manufacturers make stands specifically designed to work with their rain barrels. Otherwise you can use cement blocks or landscape blocks for a stand. Just remember that water is heavy so if you want a stand it needs to support the weight of the barrel when it is full. A gallon of water weighs 8.34 pounds, so a 50 gallon rain barrel weighs at least 417 pounds. When you position your rain barrel, make sure it is level and seated well, especially if you put it on a stand. A tippy rain barrel is dangerous. Some people put their rain barrels on a stand in order to reach the spigot more easily or so they can fit a watering can underneath the spigot. It just depends
on the design and style of the rain barrel. Finally, look for a place near where you want to use the water. I'm a lazy gardener so my rain barrels are on various corners of my house so I am never very far from one.

HOW DOES THE WATER GET IN?

Water enters a rain barrel one of two ways, either by redirecting the entire downspout to the barrel, also called top filled, or by using a downspout diverter. Top filled barrels usually involve cutting the downspout and using various gutter parts to direct the downspout to the top of the barrel. For top filled barrels there has to be an overflow outlet and overflow hose which allows the excess water to flow out of the barrel and away from the house. A downspout diverter is placed in–line or inside of the downspout and a small hose is run completely level between the downspout and the side of the barrel (near the top). Diverter filled barrels take advantage of a peculiar feature of liquids; it seeks its own level. Once the water level in the barrel reaches the hose running between the downspout and the barrel, the water no longer flows into the barrel, instead continuing down the downspout and out the extension with the rest of the rainwater. This self regulating type of diverter is used by many of the newer rain barrels because it requires less disruption of the existing downspout and water runoff management plan. If you are repurposing a barrel, you can buy a diverter separately but most of the conversion kits use this type of diverter. Downspout diverters accommodate snow melt better than a top filled barrel. Most rain barrels, conversion kits and individual diverters come with installation instructions on how to modify your downspout to work with the rain barrel.

HOW DO I USE THE WATER?

If plants love rainwater, you may think it’s safe. No, not really. The water in a rain barrel is not potable; that is, it is not fit for human consumption. Don’t let the kids drink out of it. Don’t give it to pets or livestock. When the rain runs down your roof and into the gutters and through the downspout it can pick up all sorts of things. Some roof materials can leach chemicals into the water. More importantly bird or squirrel droppings and tree debris can also be on your roof or in your gutters. With bird or squirrel droppings there is the risk of salmonella and E. coli. I once had a dead bird in my gutter. Enough said. Use it on flowers and other ornamentals and refrain from using it on vegetables and herbs to avoid possible contamination. If you still want to use it on vegetables, water the soil at the base of the plant where the roots are and don’t get it on the leaves and fruits.

BUT WAIT, THIS IS MINNESOTA...

What about those pesky mosquitoes? If you have a top filled barrel, make sure there is a screen to keep mosquitoes, critters, leaves and other debris out of your barrel. It helps keep kids out too. If you use a diverter, the system is usually completely closed and it is difficult for insects to get into the barrel.

What about winter? In the fall you need to completely drain the rain barrel because even the best of them cannot take the inevitable freezing. My rule is to empty them by Halloween. Once emptied, leave the spigot and drain holes open in case any more water gets in, it can flow right out. Some people turn their top filled barrels upside down. If you use a diverter, disconnect the hose so no water goes into the barrel. Remember you will have snow melt and it needs to be able to flow somewhere other than into your barrel. In the spring, clean the barrel and then replace it or reconnect it and you are back in business for another season.

DO I REALLY HAVE TO CLEAN IT?

Yes. All sorts of sludge and asphalt roof granules can accumulate in the bottom of the barrel. Remember I said I once had a dead bird in my gutter? What else is collecting in your gutters or the barrel? Use a weak bleach solution to kill off any bacteria or fungus that may be lurking inside. Use 1/8 cup bleach to 5 gallons of water. I find taping a brush to a yard stick allows me to get in and scrub off any algae or other slimy stuff. For barrels that use a diverter there may not be any large openings so roll it and swish around the solution as best you can. Rinse well. This is best done in the spring right before you get it up and running again.
WHAT ELSE SHOULD I KNOW?

There are a lot of fun things you can do with rain barrels. If you want more than one, you can buy linking kits so you can line the barrels up in a row and collect even more water off of just one downspout. There are also pumps available to help pump the water out of the barrel into watering cans, soaker hoses or small drip irrigation systems.

If you are repurposing a plastic barrel, you can paint it. Let your imagination and creativity take over and if you need inspiration Google and Pinterest have endless ideas. You will need to use a plastic primer or paint designed for plastic. And if it isn’t exterior grade paint, you may want to put a clear sealer over your masterpiece.

Finally the most important thing you should know is use the water. The more you use and refill your rain barrel, the better it is for your barrel, your garden and the environment.

What started out as a fun way to water my plants and keep my kids from fighting, has turned into 18 years of fondness for a simple and old-fashioned idea. Collecting water during rainy times for use during dry times is nothing new; people have done it for thousands of years. What changes over time are the containers and the technology. With an ever changing climate and increasing strains on our water systems, rain barrels are more relevant than ever. Now that you know all about rain barrels, I hope you will consider using one. But be careful, they can be alluring and you might become just like me, completely hooked and wondering where you can put another one. For more information than you ever thought possible about rain barrels, visit https://www.epa.gov/soakuptherain/soak-rain–rain–barrels

Weed of the Month

...ONE GARDENER’S WEED IS ANOTHER GARDENER’S WILDFLOWER...

*Erigeron philadelphicus* or Philadelphia fleabane, also called Fleabane, Common fleabane, Fleabane daisy

Part of the *Asteraceae* or aster family, cousin to many aster-like flowers such as sunflowers, coneflowers, thistles and goldenrod

People once thought this pretty little flower repelled fleas. It doesn’t. However it does attract pollinators and other beneficial insects. This is one of several fleabanes all native to North America, not just Minnesota and they all look fairly similar unless you like studying the shape and attachment of the leaves. It grows in moist soils along the sunnier edges of roads, fields, woods and some wetlands. The plants start as a basal cluster with long oval leaves. The leaves vary as they rise up the flower stalk to be scalloped and clasping around the stem. It finishes with branching stems holding lots of pinkish white flowers which are about 1” across. Fun fact: the flowers close up at night. Many native pollinators, such as mason bees and syrphid flies, love both the pollen and nectar. Lots of other insects also feed on this plant in some way in both juvenile and adult stages. Many of those insects are good guys since they are either predatory or parasitic insects that prey on bad guy insects. It self seeds easily and can get established in areas so some people consider it a weed. Guardians of pollinators think it’s wonderful. It can be mildly toxic to pets and livestock causing digestive issues. Folklore suggests this may have been used for medicinal purposes but I would not recommend it for human consumption.

Since it is a biennial or short-lived perennial it can be controlled in the lawn by mowing and other good cultural practices. In the garden it is easily hoed out or hand pulled. But if you find it in a garden bed, I might leave it to attract both pollinators and good guy insects. If it gets out of hand, just pull it out. For more information about fleabanes, visit www.minnesotawildflowers.info
What’s Coming Up with the SCMG

**SHERBURNE COUNTY FAIR**
Visit us at the Fair! The Sherburne County Fair is Thursday, July 18 thru Sunday, July 21st. We have a demonstration garden just outside the 4-H building, across from the 4-H Food Stand. Master Gardeners will be on hand at select times to answer your gardening questions or just to enjoy your gardening success stories. Come sit in the shade and enjoy some flowers. For more information about the Fair, click [www.sherburnecountyfair.org](http://www.sherburnecountyfair.org)

**JUNIOR MASTER GARDENERS**
Designed for youth First grade and up (ages 6 – 12) to learn all about gardening with hands on experience and projects from the Junior Master Gardener Program curriculum.

**LIBRARY SERIES**
Jointly Sponsored by the Great River Regional Library – Elk River and the SCMG

- Thursdays June 13th – August 15th except July 4th; 1:00 – 2:00 pm
- Classes held at the Great River Regional Library – Elk River Branch
- No fee, pre-registration required.

Register with the library at [https://griver.org/events](https://griver.org/events) and select the Elk River Branch to see the calendar and links to the registration form

**FAIRGROUND SERIES**
Sponsored by the SCMG

- Thursdays June 6th – August 8th except July 4th and July 18th; 6:30 – 8:00 pm
- Classes held at the Sherburne County Fairgrounds
- $10 fee to cover supplies, pre-registration required

Register on the SCMG website [https://sherburnecountymastergardeners.org](https://sherburnecountymastergardeners.org) Look for the Junior Master Gardener program under the Events tab

**ELK RIVER FARMER’S MARKET**

- Thursdays June 6th thru November 3rd; 3 – 7 pm
- Located downtown Elk River at Park Plaza on Main Street
- Stop by and visit us at the City of Elk River Table

**GARDENING CLASS WITH A MASTER GARDENER**
Jointly Sponsored by the Great River Regional Library – Elk River and the SCMG

- Friday June 14th, Friday July 19th and Friday August 16th; 1 – 2 pm
- Classes held at the Great River Regional Library – Elk River Branch
- Free but pre-registration encouraged

Register with the library at [https://griver.org/events](https://griver.org/events) and select the Elk River Branch to see the calendar and links.

**Q AND A WITH THE MASTER GARDENERS**

- Second Tuesday of every month, May thru September 1 – 2 pm
- Garden talks held at the Elk River Activity Center 55yrs+
- Bring your questions and even your plants
- Free but registration is preferred by calling 763.635.4500

**BIG LAKE FARMER’S MARKET**

- The market is held Wednesdays June 5 thru Aug 28, 3 – 7 pm; Wednesdays in September 3 – 6 pm
- We are there every 3rd Wednesday of the month
- Located at Lakeside Park
- Stop by and enjoy a gardening activity for ki
Please note, registration is NOW OPEN on our website HERE. If you would like a mail-in registration form, please contact the Extension Office at 763.765.3075 or mnext-sherburne@umn.edu

**AUTUMN GARDENING EXPO**

**Season of Change**

**SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 21, 2019**
**8:00 AM - 2:00 PM**
**OLIVER KELLEY FARM**
15788 Kelley Farm Rd NW, Elk River, MN 55330

**Keynote Presentation Featuring: “Our Changing Climate” by Dr. Mark Seeley**

Dr. Seeley was a faculty member of University of Minnesota's Department of Soil, Water and Climate from 1978-2018. In this presentation he will discuss the changes and trends in climate that are important for us to understand if we are to adapt effectively, especially in our agricultural practices.

The expo includes informative speakers, educational displays, silent auction, and a "Make & Take" Session (with an added fee). **Bring your own lunch**, morning snacks will be provided.

**Additional Educational Gardening Sessions**

- The Dirt on Soil: Best Practices for a Bountiful Garden with Anne Sawyer
- Spring Bulbs: Planting Magic with Terry Engels
- The Art & Science of Perennial Gardening with Heidi Heiland

**Plus Optional Make & Take Session - Bee House**

※ Additional fee applies and includes all necessary materials

※ This session will discuss why wild, native and solitary bees are important and how to attract them to our yards. Guests will then build a bee house and share tips on maintaining them.

**REGISTER ONLINE OR MAIL-IN FORM BY SEPTEMBER 12 - Space is limited so register today!**

※ $25 Registration Fee + $15 for Make & Take Session (optional)
※ Online registration at: sherburnecountymastergardeners.org

Thank you to Home Depot for providing the Make & Take materials!

Special thank you to Oliver Kelley Farm for providing the facilities for our Fall Event. They have offered 1/2 off admission of $6.00 (not included in the registration fee) to visit their farm at lunchtime or after our event.

Questions? Contact the Sherburne County Extension Office at (763) 765-3075 or mnext-sherburne@umn.edu