

August 3, 2010

Rain diversion: tips for water-wise garden growing from an award-winning gardener

Campbell River's Water Warriors (Educators/Cyclers) visited a Communities in Bloom (CIB) award winner to learn about growing green gardens on less water. Sandra Milligan won the 2009 award for best garden and best environmental garden. Here's what the Water Warriors report.

"I never water my lawn," Milligan says. "It doesn't go brown every year, and if it does, it does so long after most lawns have gone brown."

She points out that grass is a very efficient plant, under the right conditions. These conditions include adding lime twice a year to eliminate moss and aerating every other year, which decreases soil compaction. This in turn makes it easier for water to penetrate the soil under the lawn. Another factor that helps the lawn stay green is many small trees and garden beds that help shade the lawn.

To water the garden beds, Milligan has a water diversion system for both rain water and gray water. The gray water comes from an ice cream bucket and a second large bucket kept on the kitchen counter and beside the kitchen sink. *"You'd be amazed how quickly it fills, just from washing hands and produce,"* she says.

The other amazing sight the Water Warriors witnessed was how much water collected in a large pail placed under the garden shed downspout during 30 minutes of rain. They had placed a rain gauge on the lawn at the same time that Milligan placed the large pail under the downspout. In half an hour the pail was one-third full while the rain gauge had collected one tenth of an inch of water.

Milligan has two barrels collecting rainwater from her house roof. She describes how she keeps all her vegetable and flowerbeds watered with rain collected during downpours.

"When it rains, I go! In a typical two-hour summer down pour, the barrels fill twice. As soon as enough water has collected, I start to empty the barrels and they fill as quickly as I empty them. With one rain, I can saturate all the essential plants and give the others a drink and not have to water again for another week."

The food garden gets the top priority and two rain barrels generally supply all the water needed. *"I open the tap and keep filling one bucket while I dump another. Great multi-tasking as I get my arm work-out and water at the same time,"* she says. During the driest summer periods, about two to three weeks, food gardens and the tenderest plants are watered with a hose.

Her hardest learned lesson? Pick the right plant for the location.

"No matter how much you might want to have a maidenhair fern, you can't unless you have a cool, very humid location like the path to Elk Falls. And, no matter how much you might want a cherry tree, they hate wet feet and won't be happy in a backyard that is a puddle in winter."

Rain barrels are available from many of the Campbell River hardware stores in a range of models and prices. You will need a sturdy stand and diverter. Or you can buy a food grade barrel and make your own. You will then need to buy some hardware to create your own rain barrel.

Call or e-mail the Water Hotline: 250-203-2316, water.wise@campbellriver.ca if you have questions, concerns or would like to arrange a visit from a Water Warrior (Cycler/Educator) for helpful tips or a rain gauge.

The City's sprinkling restrictions allow watering before 7:00 a.m. or after 7:00 p.m., with even-numbered addresses watering on even-numbered days and odd-numbered addresses watering on odd-numbered days. People with newly seeded lawns can obtain an exemption permit from City Hall.

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Contact: Jenny Brunn, Water Supervisor

250-203-1597

Photo of rain gauge attached
