

THE
SMART
GARDEN

LET IT RAIN

After years of drought, you'll want to gather every last drop this season in your garden. *By Kathleen N. Brenzel*

IT TOOK A LONG-AWAITED rainy day to put this backyard in Lafayette, California, to the test. As it poured, the designer, landscape architect David Thorne (*thornela.com*), looked out over the contoured landscape, watching water from the roof work its way through the home's downspouts, under stone bridges, into channels, and finally into planted basins (bioswales). "As each basin filled up with rainfall, it turned into a pond," Thorne says. "Then the water slowly percolated into the soil. It was magical." But the real beauty of a rain garden such as this one is how it prevents runoff and replenishes groundwater, critical during drought times. After months with little rain, toxins (as from smog) can accumulate on roofs and paved surfaces; when heavy rains do hit, they carry those pollutants into storm drains and ultimately to the ocean. In a rain garden, however, channels slow down the water, while bioswales absorb and clean it. Yes, the landscaping is an investment—and there are smaller steps you can take to collect water (see opposite)—but it pays off. "A lot of planning and careful engineering goes into a garden like this," Thorne says. "Yet it looks natural, effortless."

Photographs by MARION BRENNER



1 | DOWNSPOUTS
Roof runoff spills from downspouts into a shallow depression planted with grasses and succulents.



2 | BRIDGES
Slabs of Arizona flagstone form bridges over rock-lined channels. The rocks help slow the flow of water underneath.



3 | DAMS
Rocks such as this one, partially wedged beneath a bridge, help hold back water in places along channels, so some of it soaks the soil en route.



4 | CHANNELS
Dry creeks lined with rocks and pebbles direct the water downslope and away from the house. Succulents and grasses flank this one.



5 | BASINS
This 14- by 24-foot-wide basin holds up to 18 inches of water. Grasses and native irises fill it. California fuchsia, which likes dry conditions, grows on the brim.

TOP: TREVE JOHNSON

4 OTHER WAYS TO CATCH WATER

Before El Niño rears up this winter as predicted, here are easy ways to ready your garden for rainfall.

HANG A RAIN CHAIN

Attached to a roof gutter, it channels rainwater from the roof into a catchment basin.

INSTALL A RAIN BARREL

Each holds about 50 to 60 gallons of water. The best kinds are made from recycled food-grade plastic with an intake line, spigot, overflow attachment, and removable cover. Place the barrel under a downspout.

MAKE A RAIN BED

The simplest form of a rain garden is a shallow basin located at least 10 feet from your house, where you can direct runoff from your roof or paved surfaces. Dig a 6- to 12-inch-deep basin with sloped sides and a flat bottom in fast-draining, well-amended soil. Plant it with species that can take both wet and dry conditions. Find more guidelines at ucanr.edu/sites/raingardens.

BUILD A DRY CREEKBED

A staple in the Southwest where monsoon rains can come suddenly, dry creekbeds can channel water to basins in a garden's low points. Just dig a trench from 2 to 5 feet deep, then line it with stones and sand-colored pebbles. ☺

DIGITAL BONUS
Find the right plants for your rain garden at sunset.com/raingardens.