

Water Harvesting: A Method of Landscape Irrigation

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Summary: High desert landscapes can be designed to require no irrigation after establishment, if careful site planning occurs with the exclusive use of native and adapted plants, along with sensible maintenance practices.

A refreshing change is taking place in the high desert during our drought, and it involves water. This changing paradigm involves: 1) the privilege to live in a dry place, 2) the need to use water sparingly, and 3) our landscapes can look and work better than ever, assuming we embrace the plants and mindset that belongs here.

Drip irrigation is one way to carefully supply plant water needs, but often, a less expensive method can be used. Water harvesting is one such option, but it requires initial planning to work in the long term. It transfers typically unused storm water into plantings, via land contouring and/or rain storage containment with piping. This is based on processes that work beautifully in nature, where there are no water hoses and irrigation systems.

A wide array of appealing native plants exists that allow one to have a beautiful landscape with only water harvesting, after supplemental irrigation during establishment. There are even some great plants from other dry areas of the world that also work without irrigation life support, when no natives are available to meet a specific need.

What can we realistically expect from water harvesting? Here are some experiences:

Where it is Likely to Work

1. People involved and interested in plants
2. People who embrace thoughtful maintenance
3. Projects that embrace locally native elements
4. Full-time residents or employees
5. Small and/or simple projects

Where it is Unlikely to Work

1. People with unrealistic expectations
2. People who really want “no-maintenance”
3. Projects modeled after wet, coastal gardens
4. Part-time or seasonal residents
5. Large and/or complex projects

Pros

1. Encourages the use of locally native plants first
2. One can hand-water plants during drought
3. Lower costs than irrigation equipment
4. Decreased water use and costs
5. Depends less on water supply and restrictions
6. Learning how each plant grows is pleasurable

Cons

1. Limits plant choices from much of the norm
2. Native plants can die in drought without help
3. It is not automatic; one must hand-water plants
4. It depends on often erratic rainfall
5. Plants are slower to establish and grow
6. Contractors do not warranty unirrigated plants