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## Conscientious Consumer

# Don't be a drip

**By Tom Watson**

*Special to the Seattle Times*

You've heard the dire predictions of a drought, and you'd like to be prepared. Rain barrels and front-loading washing machines have made a splash lately in media coverage and sales promotions. So you're thinking this might be the year you take the plunge.

I dove in last year. First my wife gave me a rain barrel for my birthday. A few months later, our washer died and we bought a water-conserving front-loader model. I had initial reservations about both, mostly based on cost and practicality.

Now, I'm a convert. We love them both. But there have been some surprises:

- The rain barrel, which collects runoff water from the roof, was a lot easier to install than I expected. But it doesn't conserve much water.
- The front-loading washer was less expensive than we anticipated. Even better, the water savings are much higher than we dreamed of.

Let's look at the rain barrel first. Installing it was a snap. I set the barrel on some concrete blocks, cut off my metal downspout with a pair of tin snips, and ran a short "flexible downspout elbow" (\$7 or less at a hardware store) to the barrel. After putting a screen over the top to keep mosquitoes out, I was done in less than an hour.

I enjoy using rainwater from our roof to water the garden, fill the birdbaths, wash my hands or rinse out the kitchen compost container. But I've realized that with one rain barrel, you're not going to save that much water.

The problem is that in the Seattle area, the months when we really need water in the garden — July

through September — are the driest. You would need much greater storage capacity, with several rain barrels or a residential rainwater cistern, to see a significant reduction. If you have the space and motivation to install such a large-capacity rainwater storage system, by all means go for it.

I expect our single rain barrel will save us 200 to 300 gallons of water this year. That's just a drop in the bucket: In the area served by Seattle Public Utilities (SPU), total water use averages 105 gallons per person per day. According to the American Water Works Association, the average U.S. household uses 350 gallons a day.

But every effort to save water helps, no matter how small. And rain barrels make a statement: You're a natural gardener, and you use resources wisely. You can find a rain barrel for under \$70. Check online to see what's available, and watch for rebates or discounts from your local government or water district.

Now, if you really want your water usage to dry up, get a front-loading washing machine.

It's helpful that SPU and other water utilities tell you on your water bill exactly what your household's daily water consumption is, in gallons, this year and last year. Since we bought the front-loader, our three-person household has used, on average, at least 800 fewer gallons of water a month, over a six-month period. This should result in a savings of more than \$75 a year on our water bill.

Water savings will vary by household, but the reduction is nearly always at least 6,000 gallons a year. If you do a lot of hot-water loads, you can also save plenty on your energy bill, because you're heating less water.

In addition to the water and energy savings, let me count the other ways our front-loader rocks: We use much less detergent; we can do more clothes in a load; the finished washload is drier; and it's easier on the clothes, so they last longer.

The cost of a front-loader ranges from \$550 to \$1,400 — about \$200 to \$400 more than a top-loader with similar features. Ours was \$600, and we received an additional \$100 rebate through the utility-sponsored WashWise program ([www.savingwater.org](http://www.savingwater.org)). On this Web site you can find out if you qualify for a rebate and links to other rebate programs.

So if you need a washing machine, by all means go with a front-loader. And if you want to sprinkle in a little more water savings — and feel good about using water that was previously going to waste — why not consider a rain barrel as well?

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