

Rainwater helps woman shrink water bill to about \$15 a month

'This is a personal challenge,' Jody Grenga says

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While Central Texas struggles through a drought, Jody Grenga is drinking the water she collected from her roof during two brief storms this summer.

Grenga, who lives in Sunset Valley, in Southwest Austin, has collected about 93 gallons in her 14 rain barrels.

"I consider it liquid gold that falls out of the sky," she said. "I've had one glass of tap water in the past year."

Grenga and her mother drink the rainwater after purifying it, and Grenga gives it to her seven cats, makes ice cubes out of it, cooks with it and rinses vegetables with it.

Of people who live in their Sunset Valley homes year-round, Grenga has been the lowest water user in the past year, said Katy Phillips, the city's director of public works. Her average water bill is about \$15 per month, Grenga said.

Grenga said that her goal this month is to use less than 800 gallons of Sunset Valley water; the lowest amount of city water she used this summer is 1,020 gallons, in June. For basic needs, a person usually uses 2,500 to 3,000 gallons per month, Phillips said.

"I know people in this area who use 100,000 gallons of tap water per month, but nobody knows how low you can go," Grenga said. "This is a personal challenge."

Local officials say they have seen a growing interest in capturing rainwater. The Austin Water Utility's rain barrel program has sold 1,500 barrels this year — which is typically what it sells in an entire year, said Sonja Stefaniw, a city water conservation manager. The barrels are sold at a discount of \$60 for utility customers.

John Coats, the owner of Rainwater Systems in Austin, said his business has doubled in the past year, mostly from people who live outside Austin's city limits.

He said he sells rainwater collection systems that range from \$10,000 for a system with an 8,000-gallon tank to \$40,000 for one with four 10,000-gallon tanks.

But rain has been scarce. By this time of year, Camp Mabry in West Austin has usually received just over 23 inches of rain, but it has had only about 13 inches, said Bob Rose, a meteorologist with the Lower Colorado River Authority.

That doesn't bother Grenga, a 52-year-old retired Army captain who grew up in Youngstown, Ohio, and has a bachelor's degree in biology and a master's in zoology from Ohio State University. She moved to Sunset Valley in 1998.

She said she became interested in collecting rainwater after tasting it for the first time in 2003 at a sustainable building seminar in Austin. She started her own dual water collection system, which captures water for plants and for drinking, in 2004.

Grenga said she can collect about 505 gallons of rainwater at a time with a system that cost her about \$189 because she already had many of the supplies. She has an online business that sells rainwater collection and sustainable living supplies.

During storms July 23 and Aug. 23, Grenga said, she siphoned the water out of the barrels and through a cloth filter into jars and then put the jars out in the sun for three days so the ultraviolet radiation could kill any bacteria or algae. Using ultraviolet radiation to filter water is an accepted method worldwide, she said.

The water then goes through a purifier called a Black Berkey system that uses carbon filtration before it is ready to drink.

She doesn't water her grass; the only plants she waters outside are a few she is growing in pots, a struggling rosebush and a tiny fig tree in her backyard.

Grenga said she takes many of her showers at Barton Springs Pool after her daily swim and only uses her washing machine every three weeks.

"I don't recommend anyone live like this, but I think it's fun," she said. "Tap water tastes pretty gruesome to me — it tastes like chlorine. I crave my own rainwater now."

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