

# Barrels lower water bills

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## Residents of Brightmoor anxiously wait for rain

**By Eric T. Campbell**

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DETROIT Activists in Detroit communities are reclaiming their neighborhoods by harvesting natural resources.

For several years, Brightmoor residents have responded to newly vacant lots by planting crops. This spring, they will meet water needs by utilizing rainwater that would normally runoff into the city's sewers.

Brightmoor learned the benefits of collecting rainwater in modified barrels at an April 9 outdoor workshop sponsored by the Michigan Sierra Club. The event was part of a program designed to create green infrastructure solutions, according to Sierra Club's Melissa Damschke.

Were helping to prevent water from going down drains, which prevents sewage overflows, said Damaschke, who organized the workshop.

An inch of rainfall a day is way too much for our wastewater plant.

Damaschke says water, not all of it treated, is released into the Detroit and Rouge Rivers when levels at the wastewater plant become too high. So collecting rainwater before that stage does a great service to the local environment.

Close to 50 Brightmoor residents participated in the workshop. They left with 55-gallon, terra cotta colored containers and a new appreciation for cloudy days.

Monique Adams, attending with her son Brandon, says they will use the collected water for all purposes, including watering a newly planted vegetable garden.

Washing the car, watering the flowers, these barrels will help with anything we need water for, Adams said.

Bramelle Street residents Charman Richard and Ray Porter say they would use collected water to sustain her butterfly garden she has planned for her property, next to her herbs, flowers and crabapple tree.

The event was held in a field next to the house of Clara Cupp, a 22-year resident of Dacosta Street. Her garden is one of many family gardens springing up in Brightmoor. The area supports seven community gardens and a growing sense of civic responsibility, according to Riet Schumack, co-founder of the Neighbors Building Brightmoor Association.

Whenever the city tears a house down, we try to go in and at least plant a potato patch, says Schumack. The Brightmoor Association now has a large group of block captains. Participation is increasing seasonally.

We have found that when you do a big event, people's curiosity is piqued, Schumack continues. Big projects are the way to get people involved.

Rhonda Anderson and Michelle Rodriguez, both of the Sierra Club, explained to Brightmoor residents how to disconnect the down spout from the gutter and direct it into the rain barrel; and how the higher the containers sit, the greater the pressure to push the water out of the barrel. The barrels

are fitted with spigots on the bottom to connect to water hoses and mesh covers the opening in the lid to keep mosquitoes, leaves and other debris from entering.

Melvin Williams, Sr., a board member of the Storehouse of Hope organization, says his awareness of rain barrel technology started with a home water audit he witnessed at a North End home in March. For that event, Michigan Sierra Club partnered with the Peoples Water Board Coalition. Williams says he will keep a close tally of the water he collects this growing season and how it affects his water bill.

Brightmoors Shumack says during the 2010 growing season, she collected an estimated 275 gallons of rainwater every month more than enough to keep the community garden adjacent to her house happy.

The Michigan Sierra Club received a \$75,000 grant from the Erb Family Foundation to fund the rain barrel workshop. The 55-gallon barrels used for the Brightmoor workshop were purchased by the Sierra Club from Detroit's Maxi Container Inc., a family-owned local business for over 100 years. Joshua Rubins great grandfather started the business building, reusing and repairing wooden storage barrels.

Now, Joshua and his father Richard are taking the industrial container business and adding a greener profile. They've been importing the plastic barrels from the European spice market for reuse and refitting them as rain barrels for almost three years. Joshua says most of them would otherwise end up in a landfill.

Promoting sustainability has become an important part of what we do, Rubin said.

We like to work with non-profits and schools to help promote recycling. There's really no other good use for these barrels.

Maxi Containers sells the huge density, polyethylene rain barrels to the public for \$60. They have expanded their line to include other utility items such as a barrel composter and a metal drum wood burning stove.

No one yet knows how rain barrels will affect the Detroit Water and Sewerage Departments downward cycle of raising rates to cover an aging infrastructure, which leads to more shutoffs and fewer customers. For now, the rain barrel is succeeding in spreading the word about sewer runoff and water savings for consumers.

*For more information on home water audit training call the Michigan Sierra Club 313.965.0055.*

*Maxi Container Inc. is located at 6000 Caniff, Detroit, MI. 48212. They can be contacted at 800.727.MAXI or at [www.maxicontainer.com](http://www.maxicontainer.com).*