Gardening Question and Answer

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Q. Why do people keep saying that rainwater catchment is not an efficient way to conserve water? It is free and every little bit collected results in less water needed from other sources.

A. The efficiency of rainwater catchment is challenged because the cost of storage after it is collected is usually much higher than the cost of paying for the municipal or well water saved. The water must be collected and stored when it rains to be used during dry periods. Here is a simplified analysis. A family that waters its lawn will probably average use of 15000 gallons per month. A family that does not water its lawn probably averages 10000 gallons water use/month. If rainwater catchment provided all the lawn irrigation water, it would require a storage capacity of at least 15000 gallons (if it refilled 4 times in a year). If the storage tank costs $.50/gallon to build, a 15000 gallon tank would be $7500. Since municipal water costs about $.40/1000 gallons. Ten years of municipal water for the irrigation would cost $240 which is less than the yearly loan interest on the $7500 used to pay for the storage.

Rainwater is excellent water to use for irrigation so a collection system could be justified as part of the expenses related to a gardening hobby but in most situations the cost cannot be justified by purely economic reasoning.

Q. How high should we mow our St Augustine grass in the winter? I have seen several conflicting recommendations.

A. I recommend that you continue to mow the St Augustine lawn at 3inches or higher. At that height a thick lawn will have good weed shading impact even when it goes dormant. I am not sure why some people recommend that the grass be mowed lower. As far as I know there is no research that justifies such a recommendation.

Q. When can we start picking our satsumas? Do they need to be completely orange?

A. I have been picking and eating individual satsumas from my trees for several weeks. They will sweeten some over the next month but taste good already. Use the full size fruit with some color as you need them. If you have lots of small size fruit, many of them will be orange already and can also be used.

Q. At what temperature will we need to cover our tomatoes to protect them from the cold? We have great looking red deuce, tycoon, celebrity, and valley cat plants that are loaded with green fruit.

A. Tomatoes are sensitive to any temperatures at 32 degrees or colder. If your plants are in a low area or very exposed, they could be subjected to freezing temperatures even if the general forecast was for 35 degrees. Have your blankets, sheets, agricultural fiber and products like “Planket” ready just in case. Most years if your plants can be protected from the first freeze they may benefit from 2 or 3 weeks of mild temperatures before the next freeze.

Q. What are the plants from which to choose for cool weather flowers?

A. In the shade consider cyclamen or primula. In the sun snapdragons, pansies, dianthus, stocks, calendula, ornamental kale, alyssum, violas, johnny-jump-ups, and petunias can all be used.