

Permaculture in Practice

Water, not space, is next frontier

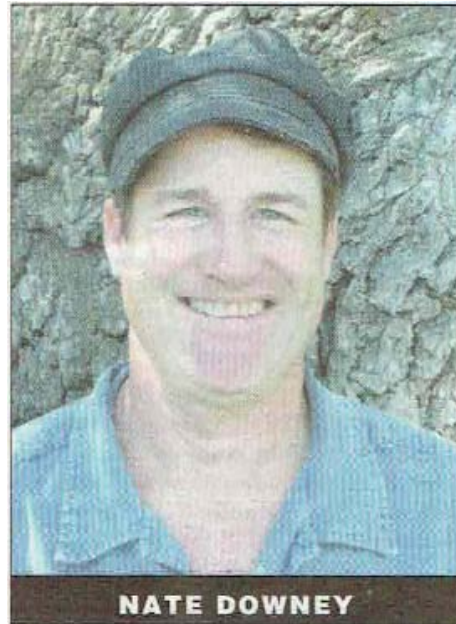
Like a mythical centaur made of human head and horse's ass, last October NASA's Centaur rammed the rear end of the Moon on a mission to extract water from the heavens. Houston, we have a problem. When nearly one billion Earthlings lack clean-water supplies and an environment and economy in peril, why spend a dime on crushed ice for a couple of astronauts?

What if more tax dollars were spent on down-to-earth programs like Dan Ransom's? As water conservation manager for the Sangre de Cristo Water Division, Ransom recently developed a simple rebate program designed to encourage the installation of cisterns throughout Santa Fe. Picture the city's old rain-barrel program on growth hormones.

Officially launching on Jan. 1, 2010, the program allows water-division customers to get cash back for purchasing a roofwater storage container. The difference this time is that size matters: as the volume of the cistern increases, so does the rebate. Depending on their capacity, rain barrels will earn between \$12 and \$50, but real money comes into play for tanks larger than 299 gallons, which the city will consider to be cisterns as opposed to mere rain barrels. At 25 cents per gallon, a 1,000-gallon roofwater storage system equates to \$250, and a 10,000-gallon system gets you \$2,500.

"It's not meant to be a reward," Ransom said in a recent phone interview. "We see the program creating a real incentive for increasing water-storage capacity for customers in the market for rainwater collection systems."

Although Ransom has taken great pains to keep the program simple, one important exception complicates matters. To get a rebate, your tank can't automatically receive makeup water from the city system. When your cistern is empty, you can water your landscape with a hose or separate irrigation system. You can install a switching system connected to city water that completely bypasses the cistern. You can even add city water to your tank manually. But you can't do what most do in the water-harvesting industry.



In most systems, a small amount of makeup water automatically drops into a cistern when a float switch tells a valve to release auxiliary water. The valve shuts off when the float indicates that a sufficient amount of water (usually for a few days of irrigation) has entered the tank. "I've seen a lot of floats fail," Ransom lamented, "and it would kind of defeat the purpose of increasing storage capacity if we gave out money to people who just filled up that same extra capacity with city water."

Often clouded by politics, greed, fear, and myth, water issues are a murky bunch, but one thing is clear: we should support imperfect programs like cistern rebates here at home, while we end our very expensive plans to harvest water from the shadow of the Moon. Will we rise and climb toward a higher level of moral consciousness, or will we fall and crawl into the future, seriously damaged by our love affair with Captain Kirk and our wasteful and misdirected "quest for knowledge"?

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