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Permaculture in Practice: Pumping water for plants, exercise

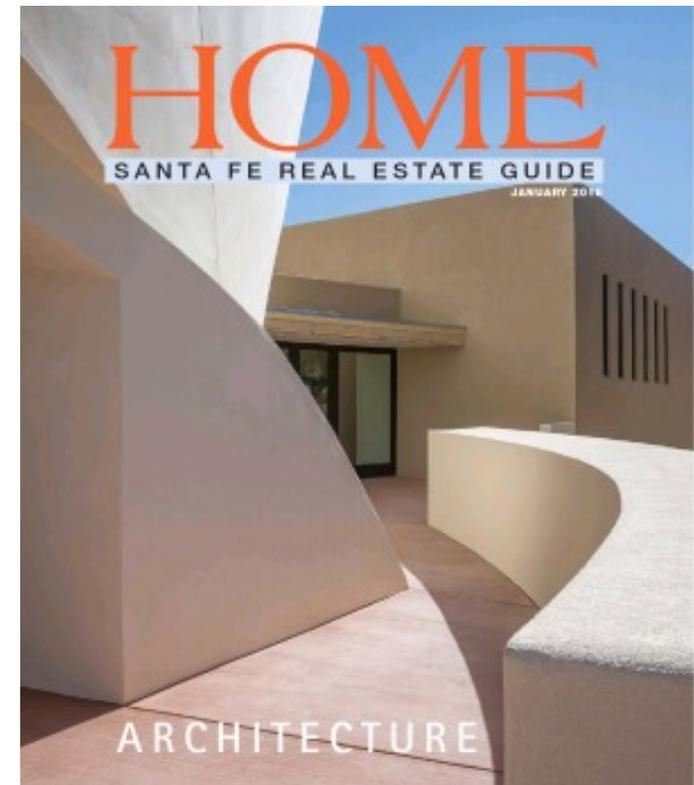
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Posted: Sunday, April 6, 2014 6:00 am

Nate Downey

Last month I fulfilled a dream, a dream I've had for a long time, a dream of pumping water with my bare hands, of lifting it with my own arms, and of letting gravity take the embedded energy to the garden, the cold frames, the compost, the

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chickens, the bushes, and the trees.

Inklings of this dream first surfaced in April 1992 when I discovered Bill Mollison and permaculture. From Mollison, I absorbed practical approaches, strategies, and techniques. I learned how to harvest precipitation with cisterns, in on-contour swales, and under the cover of lovely sheet mulches that sprout mushrooms, make worms, and build soil out of caliche.

I feel silly now that I've fulfilled this dream since it took so little actual work to do so. We've had our underground cistern system in place for eight years, but my wife and I hemmed and hawed endlessly when the subject of my "gym" came up. Where is the best place for a manual pump in the Northern New Mexican landscape? Out in the sun where it won't easily freeze? In the shade where it will be more comfortable to use? Close to the tank and in plain view? Hidden from view with a little more privacy? In the end, we decided to design a portable-pump system. This way we can have sun when we want sun, shade when we want shade, and privacy when we want privacy. So after eight years of determining the best place for the manual pump on our property, our first gym took only eight hours to install. Fortunately, I'd scavenged and saved materials for years. The foundation of the system is an extremely durable 2X4-lumber box with long screws and eight or nine hefty slats. This monster box had been over-engineered by some St. John's College students and later rolled into an arroyo. Rumor had it that the thing played a major role in a theater production. (Enter four burly dudes carrying king.)

The carrier was so beefy that I just flipped it over and stuck my new Heller-Aller Pitcher Pump (www.lehmans.com) on one side and a reused extra-large rain-barrel on the other. After leveling the ground and placing the box, pump, and barrel, I dug a trench, drilled a hole through a high point in an underground tank, and glued some pipe scraps to some old couplings, elbows, and unions.

By morning, I found no leaks. To the contrary, we've been impressed by how

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quickly the barrel fills up. Pressure from gravity down to our pea patch has been good too, but for me the most exciting effect of the total experience has been the nearly incessant yearning in my arms for more lifting. My body seems to want to pump water. It's never wanted to do pushups or chin-ups.

Frankly, I'm puzzled by my reaction. Is this a dream come true? Or have I slipped into an alternate reality? Thoughts?

Nate Downey is the author of [Harvest the Rain](#) (Sunstone Press, 2010) and the president of Santa Fe Permaculture, Inc. You can contact him through his new company website, www.permadesign.com.

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