

Steeves: Water runoff shouldn't be wasted



Rainwater from Okanagan storms should be considered a resource to be harvested rather than waste that we must get rid of.

Judie Steeves/Capital News

By [Judie Steeves - Kelowna Capital News](#)

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As rain drummed on the roof of the car, splashed on the driveway and sluiced downhill into the creek, it carried sand and silt and it had a bit of a rainbow sheen about it, typical of a fuel spill, and likely from the road.

That stream would soon be dumping its cargo into Okanagan Lake, but it meandered through a wetland first. So hopefully, any pollutants would be filtered out before they got into the lake—particularly since our water intake wasn't far from where it entered the lake.

Runoff from the roof was pooling on the lawn where the downspouts directed it, instead of being

captured in a rain barrel for use when the storm was over and the dry heat of summer returned.

Up on the roadway, rainfall from the storm was being caught by the gutters and directed into a storm drain instead of running off into a gravel shoulder or plantings below road level.

We're doing many things wrong, and our thinking is wrong-headed when it comes to runoff from rainstorms and even snowmelt.

Instead of considering it a waste product that we must get rid of, get out of sight as soon as possible, we should be seeing rainwater and runoff as the life-giving water it is—as a resource to be captured and re-used.

On the one hand, because the Okanagan is such a dry climate, we're constantly concerned about whether we'll have enough stored water to carry us through the hot and dry summers, yet instead of harvesting rainwater, we find ways to dump it into the lake, often untreated by even the most primitive filtration.

Last week's two-day workshop in Kelowna on management of stormwater changed my thinking about rain completely and made me realize in how many ways we're thinking illogically and using inefficient methods of handling rain.

Much of it was summed up by the terrific keynote speaker, Brock Dolman, who advised that we think more in terms of convex landscape shapes than concave, because we should be capturing runoff with plants in rain gardens, lower than the asphalt and concrete that won't absorb water, instead of constructing our landscaping above roadways and parking lots.

There was a lot of talk about responsibility too.

Property-owners need to change their thinking around, from looking at local government as service-providers—there to ensure that all the runoff from our properties is removed from sight, for instance—to realizing they are simply an entity in which we are a part.

Each of us has to be part of the solution too. Everyone must take responsibility for managing runoff from their property on that property, so that it doesn't run off onto common community property. It's called citizenship.

That means we can't pave or build on every square inch of our property, whether it's a car dealership, an apartment building or a single family home. We need to maintain portions that are lower than the rest, where water can drain into the soil and be naturally filtered before it reaches the nearest water body.

Such planted areas are now called rain gardens, where indigenous plants take up the excess water, their roots holding the soil in place and preventing erosion, and where natural filtration can cleanse the runoff before it reaches streams and lakes.

And/or we need to collect that runoff to store in barrels or cisterns so we can release it gradually after the storm has passed, when our landscapes need it again, conserving water for drinking.

Water's pretty important. We're made up predominantly of water, as are the creatures we co-habit with on this earth, and we all need it to continue living.

Water quality and quantity are vital for our future.

A sea-change in attitude is needed to conserve it.

Judie Steeves writes about outdoors issues for the Capital News.

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