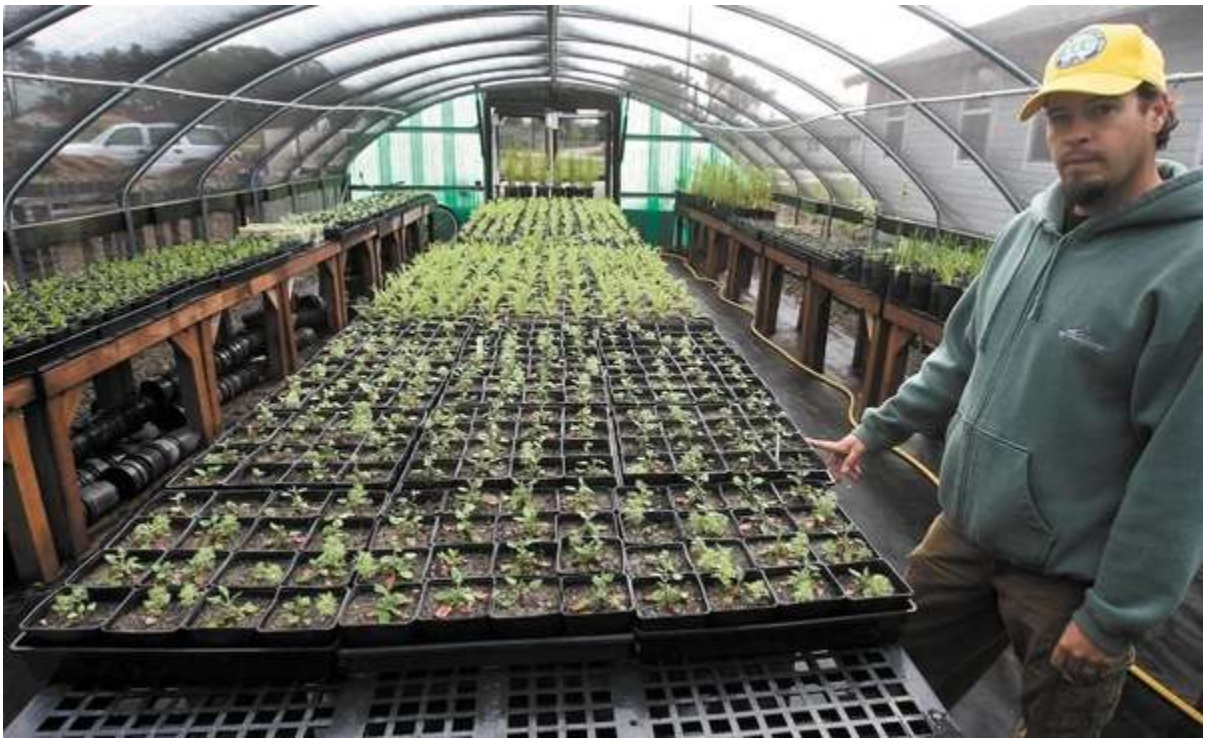
Rainwater is reused for plants

The comeback of old technology

The Tribune Sunday, Mar. 27, 2011



By David Middlecamp | **dmiddlecamp@thetribunenews.com** | **purchase prints**

Jacob Long shows some of the native plants being grown at the CCC greenhouse.

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In decades past, cisterns were a common feature in most rural areas. Gradually, they fell out of use as modern water distribution systems were installed.

Cisterns are now called rainwater catchment systems, and they are making a comeback as people look for ways to conserve water and save on utility bills.

One of the best and newest examples is located at the California Conservation Corps field station behind Cuesta College.

Corps members are busy putting the finishing touches on a shiny new tank that can hold more than 47,000 gallons of rainwater collected from the roof of a nearby warehouse.

The water will be piped to the greenhouse where the corps members grow the native plants they use in their many restoration projects. A variety of riparian and upland plant species are grown using seeds collected from the watershed where the restoration work will take place.

"Rainwater has a high mineral content which plants like, so it works out well all around," said Regina Hirsch, a rainwater catchment expert who designed the system.

Using rainwater to irrigate the seedlings means less water will be pumped from streambed wells, leaving more water for fish in nearby Chorro Creek, said Meredith Hardy, a fish habitat specialist with the corps.

Cisterns also reduce erosion and creek sedimentation because they do their small part to reduce heavy runoff during storms.

"Catchment systems are a really hot topic in the fish conservation world," she said.

The system was installed using a $150,000 federal stimulus grant from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The grant also covered the cost of training corps members how to use and maintain the system.

The corps is hoping its catchment system will serve as a model for other agencies in the area, said Domenic Santangelo, center director. Plans are already in the works to install four large catchment tanks at Cal Poly that will be used for potable water and livestock watering.

"It's a simple solution to conserving water," Hirsch said.

Araceli Loayza prepares a water storage unit.