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Water scarcity, safety: solutions surface on Gulf Island

One million gallons of clean, secure water, saved in two years on tiny Gabriola Island, at a fraction of the cost. New technology, and techniques, free of chemicals and fears of homeowner liability. Welcome news in a world now alarmed by the reality of climate change, including rapidly shrinking, potable water supplies.

“I rarely thought about it, until I moved away from the city and was suddenly jarred out of our all-too-common, shared complacency: taking water for granted,” reports Geoffrey Montgomery-Swan, who lives in BC's water-sensitive Gulf Islands. “In many places, water problems are often storage problems”.

A new UN report, “Water for a Sustainable World,” predicts a 40% global shortfall by 2030, as 20% of aquifers are over-exploited and demand for essential to all life now doubles population growth. It also confirms the urgent need for world-wide awareness, increased conservation and rainwater harvest and storage.

In water sensitive areas, residents rely on an age-old innovation: cisterns. Gabriola – the size of Manhattan, mostly sandstone with a Mediterranean climate and dry summers – has no large aquifer or community water system. As elsewhere, deep, expensive, problem wells are being abandoned.

However, day-to-day self-sufficiency and ultimately, survival, will require increased awareness and responsibility. For example, Montgomery-Swan says: “During pollen season, too few people are diverting downspouts away from cisterns”, a potential health hazard.

Wanting to provide healthy water for his family, he was shocked the first time his cistern was cleaned, recalling: “Thousands of gallons were wasted, emptied onto the ground and a worker was lowered inside with armfuls of brushes and chemicals. He emerged later, gasping for air, as very costly replacement water arrived”.

Looking over the large bill, surveying the waste and smelling the chlorine bleach, Geoffrey and his wife Sabina began searching for a better system. They eventually found it in European technologies, an underwater vacuum and robotics, which don't require draining and replacing water, questionable chemicals, or entering cisterns, a commonplace, illegal practice not covered by insurance.

Word of their superior “AquaSave plus” system is circulating across the Salish Sea, including Vancouver Island. Concerned homeowners can now afford to effectively clean cisterns once a year, as recommended by Health Canada. Swamped by requests for service from their proprietary process, the couple established an ongoing must-visit clearinghouse for information: <http://cleancistern.com>



“If cisterns were clear glass, people would be appalled by what would be revealed,” says Montgomery-Swan. “No system is perfect; invariably there is an accumulation on the bottom: organic material, such as leaves, bird droppings, pine needles and cones, pollen, minerals, insects and worms, a breeding ground for e coli and which also draws oxygen from stored water”.

“Clay, mud and minerals, such as iron and manganese also build up, even in cisterns which are fed by wells, Filters and UV systems can accomplish only so much. This debris must be removed and scrubbed from walls”.

“Because we don't drain water, cleaning a typical 2000 gallon cistern, requires the discharge of only about 50 gallons - a significant reduction of waste, as well as expense, about one-third the cost of other methods and with no interruption of service,” adds Montgomery-Swan, who is actively sharing his experiences and expertise.

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