

## Montpelier High School students help protect local rivers with art!

What do “flowers and vines,” “space,” and “dinosaurs with a meteor” have in common?

Rain barrels!

In June of 2017, art students at Montpelier High School (MHS) had the unique opportunity to learn about, paint, and creatively name a set of rain barrels. Each barrel was then displayed at MHS’ open house and concurrent art show. Before long, these barrels made their way to local storefronts in Montpelier for a silent auction where bidding wars erupted! Eileen, a winning bidder, described her purchase as a “win-win-win-win-win!”



Rain barrels do more than help homeowners capture rainwater for future use. As Eileen says, rain barrels allowed her to “collect [a] torrent of rain, protect the garden, use the water for the flowers when summer is dry, support a worthy cause, display a piece of artwork AND get an unusual present for [her husband] - all at the same time.”

Over the years, FWR has [worked with schools](#) to incorporate watershed studies into the science curriculum, and to make school campuses greener (e.g., planting pollinator gardens, [stream table rentals and demonstrations](#)). In 2013, FWR worked with Northfield High School students to complete another rain barrel art project. The success at Northfield inspired a partnership between FWR and MHS art teacher, Barbara Austin-Hutchins, in 2017.



Before getting their paint brushes out, students learned all about stormwater from FWR’s Project Manager, Shawn White. The City of Montpelier had just completed a stormwater master plan that included a list of recommended solutions to stormwater issues the city was dealing with (e.g., erosion, combined sewer overflows, flooding). Students gained insights into how managing stormwater runoff can protect stream water quality, reduce erosion, and prevent flooding.

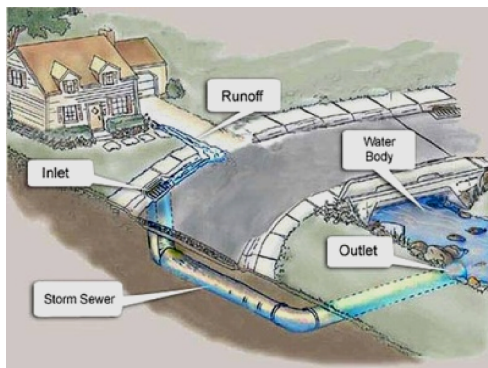
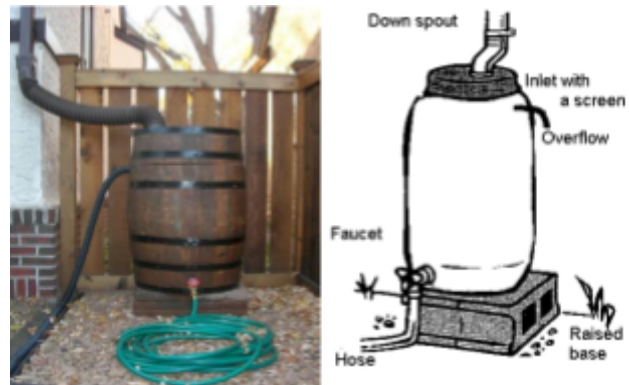
Inspired to help the City of Montpelier, the students got to work! With guidance from their teachers, Barbara Austin-Hutchins and Jason Miles, students came up with designs for the unusual format of a cylindrical “canvas” for their paintings. After putting in a lot of effort, these students transformed twelve used olive import barrels into functional rain barrels and beautiful pieces of art.



During the silent auction in Montpelier, Eileen remembers “[seeing] these beautifully painted rain barrels all around town... It was either just before Father’s Day, or just before [my husband’s] birthday, because Elena and I decided to get one for [him]. We had fun walking around town and choosing our favorites to bid on.”

Bidding took place over two weeks, and toward the end of the bidding period, some people returned several times a day to check on the status of their bids. An [article](#) in *The Bridge* even referenced the bidding! Ultimately, barrels went to the highest bidders (with installation instructions) and all barrels went for at least \$100. The rain barrels not only beautified the town, but they also helped educate the public about stormwater runoff. Each rain barrel was accompanied by a flyer about stormwater issues and how rain barrels can help. Proceeds from the auction helped pay for FWR’s volunteer [water-quality monitoring program](#).

Why should homeowners consider getting a rain barrel of their own? Rain barrels are containers that collect rainwater from roofs and store it until it can be used to water garden plants (reducing water bills). This water can then soak into the ground or be taken up by plants rather than enter the storm water drain system. An added benefit is that rainwater is healthier for plants since it does not contain chlorine, which in high levels can become toxic. A rain barrel is one example of a green stormwater infrastructure (GSI) solution. GSI solutions like rain gardens and water bars slow down, spread out, and sink in rainfall to keep rivers clean and clear and replenish groundwater that our communities depend on.



Without rain barrels, rainwater runs off impervious roof surfaces and into gutters that often direct it to driveways and street drains. Storm drains then convey an increased amount of water to streams and rivers, leading to increased frequency and severity of flooding. Surface runoff also picks up pollutants such as pet waste, heavy metals, sediment, oil, herbicides, and fertilizers, carrying them into local streams, rivers, and lakes. Using rain barrels is a fun and easy way to conserve water, reduce stormwater runoff, and protect your local rivers and

watershed. If you are feeling creative, painting rain barrels not only beautifies your yard and neighborhood, but also protects the barrel’s surface from breaking down from sunlight. And once installed, rain barrels require little maintenance.

Funding for this project was provided by National Life Insurance, local businesses, and individual donors.

[Contact us](#) if you are interested in our stormwater curriculum units or a build-your-own-rain barrel workshop.

Special thanks to these local businesses for displaying the completed barrels: Onion River Sports, North Branch Café, Skinny Pancake, Woodbury Mountain Toys, Pinky's on State, Capitol Stationers, Aubuchon Hardware, Capitol Copy, Montpelier City Hall, The Drawing Board, Guy's Farm & Yard, and Hunger Mountain Co-op.

***Additional resources:*** Painted Rain Barrel How-To, Rain Barrel Installation Instructions, [Vermont Guide to Stormwater Management](#) (p. 17-18), [Absorb the Storm guide](#), and [FWR's Slow the Rain pamphlet](#)