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Bath family opts for earth-friendly, whole-house rainwater system

by Judy Hein Terrigno

Orange may be the new black on TV, but for the Bonomo family, orange caused the family to see red. They were ready for a change at their Bath Township home.

“Everything was orange from our well – our toilet, shower and wash water,” said Michelle Bonomo. “Our well was the problem, and replacing it with another only offered a 50/50 chance of improvement.”

The other option: a whole-house rainwater system, commonly called a cistern.

“We really had only the two options – a new well or the rainwater system,” she said.

The family has lived in Bath for nine years, but prior to that Michelle and Jeff Bonomo were “city people.”

“Well water and its maintenance and care were completely foreign to us,” she said.

Before becoming a stay-at-home mom, Michelle Bonomo’s employment background was in construction, so she had experience working with contractors. So, she heads up all the home projects.

When updating their house, the Bonomos try to make environmentally friendly improvements. For example, the new septic containers they had installed include ultraviolet lights to clean the water.

Bonomo spent months researching rainwater options — installers, tank types and the like. She wanted to find an installer whose focus was rainwater systems.

“Some well-drillers and excavation companies offer rainwater systems, but it is not their forte,” she said.

Her research led her to Rain Brothers in Columbus. Rain Brothers has specialized in rainwater systems for eight years.

“I come from a long line of well drillers,” Jonathan Meier, co-owner of Rain Brothers said. “But my business partner and I gravitated toward rainwater catchment systems because it is more environmentally ethical.” In the Bonomo’s system, rainwater travels from the home’s gutter system to a 5,500-gallon underground tank. From there, the collected water is pumped to the house.

Meier said that the old practice of har-



The Bonomos’ tank holds 5,500 gallons of rainwater.

vesting rainwater is making a comeback as water quality decreases and wells dry up.

“Ohio has more rainwater systems than any other state per capita,” he said.

Meier’s company travels statewide installing rainwater systems. “Mostly to rural areas that use rainwater for irrigation purposes,” he said, although his company is installing a system at Mitchell’s Ice Cream in Ohio City to use for dishwashing and other purposes.

“We had a local guy do the excavation, but Rain Brothers did everything else,” Bonomo said. It was a massive project—I had no idea how crazy it would be. Our landscaping is gone, and we have huge holes and trenches.”

The Bonomos chose the 5,500-gallon concrete tank for their system, which uses an ultraviolet light and carbon filter to clean the water. When the tank is completely filled, it will provide water for the house for about eight weeks, according to Bonomo.

“The tank was delivered by semi in two parts, then was glued together to make the seal tight,” Bonomo said.

Plastic tanks are another option, but they can shift when the ground freezes, so they are more popular in warmer climates.

To install a whole-house rainwater system, Meier said a plumbing permit through the local municipality is required. The Summit County Environmental Protection Agency also requires a permit, Bonomo said. The EPA tests the water to make sure the system was installed and is running correctly.

Rain Brothers removed the old water softener tanks, unhooked the well and

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Michelle and Jeff Bonomo stand near the riser of the rainwater holding tank that is buried on their property. Photo by P. Wilson



Installation of the system included the digging of trenches for pipelines.

installed the new system. It took approximately four days for the company to install. Costs for a system the Bonomo's size range from \$12,000 to \$15,000.

Maintaining the rainwater system is comparable to the well system with some improvements.

"No orange well water," Michelle said. "No clogging pipes. No chlorine or chemicals."

One complication for rainwater systems is drought. The Rain Brothers told the

Bonomos to expect to have their tank filled with delivered water about twice a year on average because of stretches of low rainfall.

"It's amazing how much more I want it to rain now," Bonomo said.

To maintain their new system, the Bonomos will need to empty the gutters' strainer basket every three to four months, change the carbon filter every six months and replace the ultraviolet light once a year. She estimates the annual maintenance to be about \$600.

"With the well, we spent a \$1,000 here

and a \$1,000 there to maintain it," she said.

In time, she said the system will save them money.

"I would definitely recommend it to my neighbors," she said. "We have clean water. And I love collecting the rainwater that is here. It is a great idea to reuse it."

In areas where public water is available, Meier encourages the use of rain barrels.

"Rainwater does not include chlorine or fluoride, so people who use it for irrigation in their gardens will see plants thrive," he said. ∞



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