



Is it worth it? Harvesting rainwater

What is it? The collection of water that would otherwise have gone into drains or the ground. Rainwater can be used, without treatment, for domestic functions such as flushing the lavatory, supplying the washing machine and in the garden – activities which account for up to half of household water use (roughly 70,000 litres annually for a typical family).

Is this a good idea? In principle, yes, as our water resources are under pressure and the water we use to flush lavatories and supply washing machines has undergone lengthy and expensive treatment to make it suitable for drinking – a waste of a valuable resource. In practice, while installing a water butt is simple, there is an environmental impact to manufacturing more complex domestic systems which, along with the difficulty in installing them, means that this is not always the best option.

Is rainwater safe to drink? No, but the Environment Agency says that studies from Germany have found that because rainwater is 'soft' it is ideal for clothes washing and may extend the lifespan of a washing machine because there is no limescale build-up.

Is it suitable for every household? Considering that 100,000 litres of rainwater falls on the average roof every year, even a £20 water butt for garden use and car washing would be beneficial. The Centre for Alternative Technology recommends fitting a water butt to your downpipe. More elaborate systems cost up to £2,000 (excluding installation). They are easier to fit into new builds because the plumbing can be designed around them. The cost of installation and the relative cheapness of mains water means that it is unlikely to be worthwhile in an older house. **Sarah Callard**

UK Rainwater Harvesting Association: ukrha.org
Correction: the WWF does not endorse Bio-D cleaning products (December 9) but it does sell them on its website and by mail order. The only green cleaning product range endorsed by the WWF is Fresh & Green

Eco hero Lulu Sturdy, vanilla farmer

The story of how Lulu Sturdy came to run a farm in western Uganda is pure Boy's Own adventure. Equally unlikely is her success over the past eight years at turning round the lives of local farmers through the production of high-quality Fairtrade vanilla, which she sells on an increasingly large scale to Europe and the US.

She is the third generation of her family to live at Ndali, a 1,000-acre estate in the shadow of the Mountains of the Moon (the Rwenzoris) bought by her grandfather to grow tea (the soil proved too alkaline). He lived there from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s, when Idi Amin was in power. Her uncle, Mark Price, reclaimed the farm in the early 1990s but couldn't think of a way to make it pay, so built a tourist lodge instead. The farm remained undeveloped and ran at a loss.

In 1998 30-year-old Sturdy was a furniture maker living near Chipping Norton. When her

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uncle fell ill, she came out to run the half-built lodge for a month while he recuperated. The day after her arrival he died. 'After three months of running the farm and lodge as an emergency measure I was smitten,' Sturdy says. 'But it was only on returning to the UK that I realised I had to go back – I felt I'd left a lot of work unfinished.'

Sturdy has no farming background; at Bristol University she read religious studies. 'Everything about farming I've learnt on the job,' she says. 'But that's easy if you have passion and ask enough questions.' For the first two years she had no car or telephone. 'Having no mechanisation, everything was and still is done by hand.' After



trying a number of crops, she hit upon vanilla, 'a high-value, low-volume crop that could work financially on a small scale'. It became clear that to make a success of it she was going to have to 'grow it and buy it from others, cure it, extract it, package it, brand it, market it.'

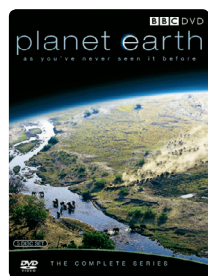
She and a small group of vanilla farmers in the mountains worked to achieve Fairtrade certification, which they did in September 2005. Two months later Ndali Fairtrade vanilla was launched at Waitrose and in independent UK shops. The Fairtrade network has grown from 50 to more than 1,000 farmers, and last November Ndali Vanilla Extract Intense was launched, 'without the addition

of sugar and glycerine used by other manufacturers'. Demand is such that 'in two months we've gone from curing seven tons of vanilla to 40 tons; and from a building of 600 square feet to constructing one of 6,000 square feet to make space for more sweating boxes, an extraction room and small packing unit.'

Sturdy is now an expert in vanilla production, perfecting the art of curing pods to encourage the formation of pure vanillin crystals. These take at least six months and form only on best-quality vanilla. 'The downside is educating cooks that the crystals are not mould but the champagne and truffles of vanilla.' ndali.net

Annabel Freyberg

Photograph by Joe Miles



Lulu Sturdy recommends...

Understand the interconnectivity of all things on the micro level: read the physicist Richard Feynman explaining the essentials of physics in *Six Easy Pieces*; for a lighter, intriguing read, try Andrew Crumey's novel about quantum mechanics, *Mobius Dick*; or consider the difference between being 'wisely selfish' and 'foolishly selfish' (dalailama.com/page.18.htm). **Become** an observationalist 'scientist' to really understand cause and effect. I invaded the space of the spiders, ants, snakes, flies, lizards and fruit bats with the walls of my new house in the bush, yet soon enough everyone settled about their usual business of eating each other (myself excepted), until we reached an equilibrium. **Watch** *Planet Earth* (five-disc DVD box set)