



Being A Waterwise Family

Freshwater is soon going to be the single most sought after commodity on Earth. Experts predict that by 2050, a third of the people on Earth may lack a clean, secure source of freshwater, and South Africa will be no exception. How did this happen? The amount of moisture on Earth has not changed; the water the dinosaurs drank millions of years ago is the same water that falls as rain today. But the thing is, our planet has become more crowded, and a privileged minority abuses this limited resource to the detriment of all. **Petra Vandecasteele**, editor of *Kids of Nature*, looks at why, these days, water is playing such a crucial role in our decision-making when moving houses.

Water covers two-thirds of the Earth's surface, but only 2.5% of this is freshwater of which most remains inaccessible, and the majority of what is available goes into the controversies of agriculture. So, our first concern when looking for a new home is long-term access to water. We wouldn't want to find ourselves in an area that faces drought in a decade or two. Nor would we want the property to be flooded. The next step is to gear our home towards sustainable practices, because abundance shouldn't equate liberal use.

My children and I love natural swimming ponds. Yes, I mean 'pond'. As it appears, we're not the only ones to be crazy about them, and swimming ponds are in high demand, understandably. They're beautifully integrated in the landscaping of the garden and these delightful ponds are not only an absolute pleasure for the eye and the soul, they're functional wetlands in their own right. It's all about balance and working with nature, and a healthy pond doesn't require any chemicals, nor maintenance other than cutting the odd dead leaf and chasing the herons away from the koi.

Leisure aside, I'd like to find a property

Photo JoJo Tanks



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in a water-rich location, but most importantly, how can we design our home in a way that is sustainable? In the end, it's not just about me. The Earth is very nearly a closed-circuit and too often we underestimate the interrelatedness of the land and the people who live on it. Sustainability doesn't stop with me, it starts with me. Whatever I do has an impact on people I may not even know, today and all the days hereafter. And vice versa. I want to leave a beautiful legacy for my grandchildren and the generations to come. I want future generations to be able to look back with a smile on my turtle steps that contributed to save their bountiful world. I wouldn't want to be co-responsible for stealing the birthright of future generations to nature, and more specifically, freshwater. I want to be part of the solution, not the problem.

And so I decide to have a critical look at our current property and take stock of the pros and cons in terms of water management:

In the garden

- The solar panels that heat the swimming pool are a great energy-saver, but contribute to increased evaporation of the water. Also, the view from the overflow is awesome, but exposes the pool to the wind, causing more loss of water.
- Landscaping is appropriate for our climate, using waterwise indigenous plants and grasses that are best suited to natural rainfall.
- Control of alien plants that suck our garden dry.
- Sprinklers and irrigation by droplet in summer to water the plants in the patio and closest to



Photo Petra Vandecasteele

the house. Done after sunset and before sunrise (coolest times to avoid evaporation) for a maximum of 10 minutes each. No irrigation on windy and rainy days.

- Leaks are immediately repaired.
- Gutters catch rainwater (poured into a Jojo tank): one to top-up the swimming pool, the other to harvest drinking water.

In the house

- Installation of low-flow shower heads and faucet aerators on all taps.
- Toilets are 'home-made' low-volume (block the floater halfway or put a brick in the water container) and we mostly flush only halfway through.
- Leaks are immediately repaired.
- Dishwasher and washing machine are energy- and water-efficient.

But there is no doubt that we can do better. I want to hear what experts have to say on new technologies and I want to learn from other people's experiences. Ignorance is bliss, but not when it comes to water.

I also feel strongly about looking beyond the green outcome of a new product or appliance. Shouldn't we be a little more critical and check what's involved in the actual manufacturing process? At the end of the day, how green is my green solution? I find it difficult to make the right choices in this complex world of sustainability. All too often we buy to ease our conscience and conveniently choose not to know what's involved in the process. And as long as we keep on doing this, green means no more than effective marketing.

So, for our next home, I definitely want a swimming pond rather than a swimming pool. I also want to know more about the latest innovations in composting toilets and, depending on where we will live, investigate fog harvesting as an alternative source of potable water. We'll be growing our own vegetables, so I'd like to learn more about enhancing soil properties for moisture retention. And, the other thing we haven't investigated yet is waste water management. One turtle step at a time is all it takes to become a waterwise family. **SG**

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