

Guidance

Using water butts in schools and nurseries

This guidance is meant as a practical guide to support the safe installation, use and maintenance of water butts within school and nursery settings.

A water butt captures rainwater runoff for use in watering plants, therefore reducing demand for mains water and can also help slow water flow into drains during heavy rain.

It is vital to remember that any collected rainwater is not drinking water, nor should it be used for play.

This guidance reflects current HSE principles, but duty holders should identify and assess sources of risk, agree controls and record decisions for themselves.

Further guidance can be found at:

- Health and Safety Executive: Legionella and Legionnaires' disease guidance.
- [School rain gardens guidance](#)
- [RHS water collection guidance](#)



Prior to Installation

- **Assess the site and activity.** Consider pupils' ages and supervision, access routes, manual handling, stability, contamination, overflow, hoses and winter conditions.
- **Choose a suitable roof.** Collect from a reasonably clean roof and gutter; avoid runoff that may contain hazardous residues. Fit a leaf/debris filter.
- **Plan overflow.** Direct any overflow safely to a drain, rain garden or other suitable permeable area, away from buildings, paths and play spaces.
- **Complete a Risk Assessment** and agree when it is inspected or emptied (e.g. over summer holidays).

Safe Installation

- Use a purpose-made, UV-resistant water butt with a **close-fitting, child-resistant lid**, screened inlet and secure tap.
- Place it on a purpose-made stand or firm, level, load-bearing base and secure to a wall if possible. A full 200-litre butt weighs about 200 kg: follow the manufacturer's instructions and secure it against movement or toppling.
- **Choose a shaded or cool, sheltered position**, or put behind a shelter or outer wall to keep the water cooler.
- Place it away from doors, fire routes, busy paths and climbing opportunities.
- Fit the diverter, connectors and overflow to the manufacturer's instructions. Ensure all pipework is secure and avoid trip hazards.
- Label clearly: **"RAINWATER - NOT FOR DRINKING, HANDWASHING or PLAY."**
- Commission the system before pupil use: check the lid, stand, fixings, tap, filter, diverter and overflow, including during rainfall if possible.

Safe Use

- Use the water for **established ornamental planting and general garden watering**. For edible crops, apply it to the soil rather than directly to produce that will be eaten raw.
- Use watering cans. **Do not create a fine spray or mist**, and do not allow water play.
- Do not drink it, wash hands or food with it, fill paddling pools, or connect it to drinking-water plumbing.
- **Supervise pupil access.** Wash hands with soap and mains water after gardening and cover cuts with waterproof dressings.



Stop use immediately if:

- the butt, stand, lid, tap or fixings are loose, cracked, leaking or unstable;
- the lid or screen is missing, or there is evidence of animal access, contamination, objectionable odour or unusual discolouration;
- water has become warm and stagnant over time, or use would create spray or aerosol;
- overflow causes ponding, slippery surfaces or damp near a building.

Isolate access, empty safely if necessary, and have the problem corrected by a competent adult before reuse.

Routine care:

- **Before each use:** visual check of lid, tap, stand, water condition and surrounding ground.
- **Monthly and after storms or high winds:** visual check of fixings, filters, diverter, overflow, leaks, stability and signage; clear debris safely.
- Drop a **sterilising tablet** in each half-term – best done before rain.
- **At least annually**—and sooner if dirty or contaminated—disconnect or isolate, empty, remove sludge, clean with mild detergent, rinse and inspect.
- **Before holidays and winter:** decide whether to drain or isolate according to the product instructions and local frost risk.

Risk of disease and contamination

Legionella is primarily a risk when contaminated water is inhaled as fine droplets; avoiding sprays and prolonged warm stagnation is very important. There are other bacteria and viruses that are often brought in by animals such as rats (e.g. Weil's disease, cryptosporidium) which is why a secure lid is so important.

To ensure safe use of a water butt, the above control measures and guidance should be put in place and regular maintenance and inspection advice adhered to.

