

# Architectural downspouts

Rainchains are meant to be seen, not hidden around the corner

By Mark Ward Sr.

**Intense competition in the gutter industry** has spawned heavy consumer advertising, which in turn has raised homeowners' awareness of gutter products. Now that awareness is trickling down into accessory products, from conductor heads to decorative hangers — or to an increasingly popular option, Japanese rain chains.

"Rain chains are a growing product line," says Mike Millman of GutterSupply.com, a materials supplier and online retailer based in Lake Bluff, Ill. "They've been used in Japan for more than a hundred years, and now rain chains have been introduced to the United States."

The metal, usually copper, chains can replace a conventional downspout, as rain water cascades down a vertical series of cups or links. In addition to the visual display of cascading water, the action can produce a pleasant tinkling sound — compared to the clunky noise that emanates from enclosed downspouts.

Sales growth in rain chains, suggests Millman, dovetails with rising interest in Eastern concepts such as feng shui (literally "wind and water") or the ancient practice of placing objects and arranging space in harmony with the environment. Yet rain chains also offer some pragmatic benefits as well to both installers and homeowners.

Rain chains retail at about \$8 to \$20 per linear foot, reports Millman, or up to \$50 for intricate handcrafted products. "Installers should think about adding rain chains to their product lines," he recommends. "Many homeowners are interested in unique gutter solutions but don't yet know about rain chains, and so you can introduce them to the product. Rain chains are unique, which means higher margins for the installer. And the product's uniqueness helps set you apart from other contractors."

## Simple Installation

The chains are easy to install. A simple



Guttersupply.com photo

wire clip sits in the gutter over the downspout hole. The center portion of the clip is bent in a V-shape to extend below the hole, which helps direct water flow down onto the chain. The rain chain itself attaches to the bottom point of the "V." Though installation may require some bending of the attachment so it sits correctly in the gutter, adds Millman, "They're a fairly simple element to install."

Moreover, if the clip is copper and the gutter aluminum, to prevent electrolysis, "You could put a piece of plastic on each side of the outlet hole underneath the gutter attachment piece, or place a barrier such as ice-and-water shield between the two metals. As long as there's no direct contact between both raw metals, you shouldn't have a problem," Millman points out.

At ground level, anchoring the rain chain should be considered. "They can drain into a variety of receptacles like basins, bowls, saucers, or pebbles," Millman says. His company also sells hammered copper bowls and dishes which anchor the chain, provide drainage, and enhance aesthetics. "The manufacturers say

that rain chains maintain their tension by weight and gravity," he notes, "but I also recommend tying them down so they won't sway in the wind."

GutterSupply.com sells approximately 25 designs. Cup-style rain chains can offer the appearance of a chain of lilies, star flowers, scallops, or bells. Both round and square cups are available. Link-style chains can feature single loops, double loops, chain link, or a combination of loops and links. Millman's company even offers "theme" rain chains crafted in such motifs as grape-and-leaf, wave-and-dolphin, hummingbird, and pineapple.

"Rain chains aren't a complete replacement for downspouts," advises Millman, "but they're an aesthetic alternative, possibly for high-visibility places like a front entrance where a conventional downspout may look obtrusive."

## Chains vs. Downspouts

At Slate and Copper Sales Company Inc., a manufacturer and distributor based in Erie, Pa., Larry Marie agrees that "rain chains add expression and character to a gutter system." From the growing number of designs now available, he suggests, "It seems like there's a big and growing market for rain chains."

Marie concurs that rain chains cannot replace conventional downspouts in every situation. "It's recommended that you keep the chain away from the wall of your house," he explains. "A three-foot overhang is what people advise. But not every homeowner has eaves that overhang far enough." Nevertheless, he adds, "I've seen some people use an elbow system to move the chain further away from the wall."

As for the performance of rain chains, Marie readily admits the products "are not downspouts; they splash around and so they're not ideal for capturing and draining water."

Though Marie agrees rain chains are "quick to install and take only about five minutes to put up," he is more guarded about

the profit potential for gutter installers. “The chains are expensive for an installer to buy, because the products are labor-intensive to manufacture. So that profit margin you can make on rain chains isn’t real big.”

However, with the chains retailing at \$10 to \$30 per linear foot, he believes a gutter company that becomes a wholesale distributor of rain chains could enjoy a markup of between 30 and 50 percent. Further, a gutter company that decides to manufacture and sell the product directly to consumers, he suggests, could realize a markup of between 200 and 300 percent.

In selling rain chains to homeowners, Millman reports that installers can expect to hear some common questions. “People ask about the functionality of rain chains and whether they can handle a large volume of water,” he says, and suggests a good rule of thumb in high rainfall-density areas is not to exceed more than 25 to 30 feet of gutter draining into one rain chain.

Homeowners also may worry about ice forming on the chains. “We sell a lot of chains to the Northeast,” responds Millman, “and haven’t heard of icing problems. We have, however, had customers tell us how gorgeous the chains look when icicle shapes are frozen onto them.” He says the rain chains also function properly in icy conditions, since the metal of the chain creates ice crystals and water is then attracted to the ice.

Another question Millman encounters from consumers is how the appearance of rain chains may become altered through age and weathering. “This depends on where you live,” he answers, “and how acidic the rain is. Brass darkens with age, taking on rich bronze or brown tones. Copper also darkens with age and tends to take on more of the familiar green patina effect. None of our chains are finished with lacquer, so they all undergo a natural aging process.”

## Traditional Charm

In the Japanese language, rain chains are called kusari doi and, Marie relates, “have been around for centuries.” In Japan, he says, the chains are seen as “kinetic sculptures which create a peaceful and tranquil sound, and have a fountain effect which can enhance both home and gardens. In fact, a lot of people install rain chains just for their garden areas.”

Over the centuries, rain chains in Japan



Austin Gutterman photo

have often been part of a rainwater harvesting system, as runoff from the roof is transported by the chains into large barrels for domestic water supply. And ceremonial temples and shrines in Japan frequently boast large and ornately crafted rain chains as part of their traditional architecture.

Today’s chain link designs are the closest in form to the traditional Japanese originals, while loop designs also reflect Asian influence. By contrast, cup-style rain chains have been developed because they splash less when chains are installed near windows, doors, and walkways. The cup style also provides greater efficiency for transporting water. For the funnel shape of each cup, together with the hole at the bottom, channels rainwater from one cup to the next in the chain.

Beneath the chain, Japanese homeowners often place a stoneware or ceramic pot. In the United States, some homeowners construct a square cedar or redwood box and then fill it with pebbles, or simply put some stones or a paver under the chain to dissipate falling rainwater. Ceramic

saucers and bowls are available at all home and garden centers, while companies such as Slate and Copper Sales and GutterSupply.com sell hammered copper bowls and dishes.

“The effect,” Marie states, “of the rain chains really is mesmerizing and beautiful.” **GO**

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