

Rainman

Renowned rainwater harvester Billy Kniffen may be retired, but he's not slowing down anytime soon



One week after his official retirement from the Texas AgriLife Extension Service on April 30, Billy Kniffen could be found crisscrossing the United States—bringing rainwater harvesting education and systems to organizations in Arizona, North Texas, Kansas, and Georgia.

“I don’t know yet what retirement is,” Kniffen said. “Last week was my first week of retirement, and I spent almost all of it shoveling, digging holes, and setting up irrigation systems.”

Since 2008, Kniffen served as AgriLife Extension’s statewide water resource specialist, focusing on rainwater harvesting. Prior to that, he had been an AgriLife Extension agent in South and Central Texas since 1982. In addition to his service with AgriLife Extension, Kniffen has been a director and education coordinator for the American Rainwater Catchment Systems Association (ARCSA) and helped organize the Texas Rainwater Catchment Association, serving as its first president.

“I worked with ARCSA to develop an accredited professional educational program through which we’ve taught 2,000 people across the nation over the last five years,” Kniffen said.

The recipient of a Texas A&M University System Board of Regents Fellow Service Award in 2006 and a 2010 Vice Chancellor’s Award in Excellence in the technical/Extension support, off-campus category, Kniffen’s name has become synonymous with rainwater harvesting implementation and education. He and his wife, Mary, live in Menard in a home solely dependent upon harvested rainwater for drinking and other household and landscape water needs.

Kniffen said he first started working with rainwater harvesting as an Extension agent in Hays County, where he often worked with water-minded San Marcos residents. Fast forward a couple of decades, and teaching rainwater harvesting has taken Kniffen all over the nation.

"I've been to every corner," Kniffen said, "Hawaii, Maine, the Florida Keys, north of Seattle, all the way down to Los Angeles, and lots of places in between."

"The need is the same everywhere I go—we've got to protect our water supply now and for future generations."

After years of teaching rainwater harvesting, Kniffen recently has been developing more educational tools to teach users how to maintain, repair, and inspect their systems.

"An important part of our inspection and design course is teaching users how to develop an operations manual for that particular system so that they'll know what the parts are, how to maintain the system, and how to fix it if something goes wrong," he said. "That education is something that's not being done effectively enough right now, so that's what I'll be doing."

With drought affecting much of Texas, Kniffen said that interest in rainwater harvesting from industry, various levels of government, and homeowners is increasing.

"The industry is booming, and education has got to keep up," Kniffen said. "I'm very fortunate to be in the position I am to help shape that process. I don't want us to wait until the well runs dry to realize how important our water supply is."

Kniffen remembers water quantity affecting his life, even at a young age.

"In 1957, I was 7 years old, and our neighbor's well went dry," he said. "I went over there, and he had me get in the bucket and lowered me down, and I scooped mud out of it for several hours. And this drought is just as serious."


"I think drought is a time when people are awakened to water issues," he said. "They see how quickly the lake can go dry, how fast that aquifer can drop. Because of drought, interest in rainwater harvesting is very high right now, and decision makers are more receptive to implementing these practices."

Even with the drought, Kniffen's rainwater-sustained home is going to be just fine, he said.

"At my house in Menard, we have enough water stored to last for about eight more months, even if it doesn't rain at all," Kniffen said. "Of course, I hope it does rain, but it's great to be able to teach that the process works, even when rainfall is way below normal."

Water needs in other parts of the world are also of growing interest for Kniffen. He recently gave a rainwater harvesting workshop for Healing Hands International, an organization that provides medical supplies and assistance around the globe, and is working on other international opportunities.

"It's been an honor to serve in Extension," Kniffen said. "My future is looking about like my past—I will continue moving rainwater harvesting forward, professionally here in the United States, as well as helping to provide precious water around the world."

For more information, visit twri.tamu.edu/txH2O. 



Left: Billy Kniffen travels around the country, teaching people to make rain barrels for rainwater harvesting. Photo by Leslie Lee, Texas Water Resources Institute.

This page: Billy Kniffen demonstrates how a simple wildlife water trough can be made and connected to a rain barrel. Photo by Leslie Lee, Texas Water Resources Institute.