IRRIGATING FOR A HEALTHY LAWN

Would you like to have a beautiful, healthy lawn this summer? Do you want to save money and water? Using the right amount of water at the right time can make this possible. You can help protect our water supply by learning a few basic tips for operating your automatic irrigation system.

Improper operation of irrigation systems is one of the main reasons that lawns do poorly. Our lust for a lush lawn often motivates us to overuse water, which can actually lead to more mowing and increased disease, insect, and weed problems.

On established lawns, water the lawn as needed, not on a fixed schedule. The key to watering as needed is in taking control of your irrigation controller. If you want a great-looking lawn, you cannot simply set it and forget it. The irrigation controller is the brain of the system, but it only knows what it has been told to do. Knowing what information to put into the irrigation controller to will put you in control of the watering.

What Day(s) should I Water?

The best way to keep your lawn healthy is to only water when it tells you it's thirsty. Water grass when 30% of your lawn shows these signs: footprints remain in grass long after being made; the lawn has a bluish-gray appearance; leaf blades are folded in half length-wise.

Watering on an as-needed basis encourages grass to grow deep, tough root systems. Drought tolerance will be improved, and you will probably have fewer disease and weed problems. As a general guideline, Florida lawns typically need water every 3-5 days in spring/summer.

For the healthiest lawn possible, only use the "automatic" setting on your irrigation system when you're on vacation. Otherwise, leave the controller in the "off" position. Leaving the system set on automatic usually translates to over-irrigation, leading to weed and disease problems.

Work with nature: irrigate only when rainfall doesn't provide enough water. Use a rain gauge to see how much free water is applied to your lawn. If at least ½" of rain has recently fallen, empty the gauge, and leave your system off.

What time should I water?

Water evaporation loss from sprinklers is greatest during the middle of the day due to sunlight and wind. Statewide, irrigation is prohibited 10:00am-4:00pm. Water in the morning to minimize evaporation. Watering in the morning also reduces the time plants are wet, reducing disease.

How Long Should Each Zone Run?

Each irrigation zone is unique and the run time for each is determined separately. You want the controller to run long enough to put ½" of water on each zone. Controller settings are in minutes, not inches of water, so how long should you run each irrigation zone? The answer is to calibrate the irrigation system, zone by zone. Here's how:

- Set several straight-sided, flat-bottomed cans within an irrigation zone.
- Time how long it takes for most of the cans to fill with ½" of water. This tells you how many minutes you need to water in that zone.
- Repeat this with each zone and program your irrigation controller to run long enough to apply the needed ½" of water in each zone.
- Write down the required minutes of run time in each zone for future reference in case the controller's memory should fail.

Later observations may indicate the need to increase the run time for hot, sunny zones or decrease the run time for shady zones. Replace the irrigation controller's battery every couple of years to prevent the controller from...
resetting itself. Once each zone is properly set, don't change how long you water, just change how often according season. If your controller has a "percent" setting, leave it permanently at 100%.

About half the water used in homes today is for irrigation. Help protect Florida's water supply by practicing the basic principle of watering only as needed. Taking control of your automatic sprinkler system is the first step to having a beautiful, healthy lawn with less water. Take these additional steps to reduce landscape water use further:

- Inspect your system for problems. Many irrigation problems go undetected because people are not usually around when their systems are running.
- Make sure your rain sensor is placed where rain can actually fall on it.
- Avoid watering things that won't grow!
- Don't mix sprinkler types (stationary heads, rotary heads, micro-irrigation) in a zone.

For landscape and irrigation questions, call the UF/IFAS Osceola County Extension at 321-697-3000.

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Jessica Sullivan, FYN Coordinator
Osceola County Extension/University of Florida
1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane
Kissimmee, FL 34744
321-697-3000
jsul@osceola.org
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