PLANT LIFE COLUMN

RAIN SENSORS

With Central Florida's hot climate, it is often necessary to irrigate our landscapes, but during times of wet weather, irrigation is a waste of resources. Not only does unnecessary irrigation waste water, fertilizer, pesticides, and money, it may also drown out plants causing them to die. To eliminate over irrigation, a simple, inexpensive rain sensor can be attached to your system.

Irrigation systems consist of two basic components, a controller and a rain sensor. A controller is a timing device that controls the frequency and length of time watering occurs. A rain sensor prevents unnecessary irrigation during a rainfall and during periods soon after a rainfall.

Before 1991, a controller was the only component needed for an automatic sprinkler system. Since then, the Florida Legislature passed the Xeriscape™ Bill (HB91), which requires newly installed automatic irrigation systems to have a rain sensor device to prevent unnecessary watering. If your system was installed after 1991, you need to have a rain sensor. It's the law.

The simplest rain sensor available is designed to accumulate rainfall and delay further irrigation until it is evaporated from the sensor and needed by the landscape. It is important to place the sensor where it can collect rainfall without being obstructed by overhangs or trees, not located in complete sun or shade, and is protected from wind. These guidelines will help keep the sensor more accurate.

Frequent monitoring and adjustment to your irrigation system is necessary for maximum irrigation efficiency. After a sufficient rainfall, irrigation from November to March should be delayed for about four days, two days from April through July, and three days from August to October. If your irrigation system if properly calibrated and applying the correct amount of water to your landscape, then your plants will survive these days without water.

To calibrate your automatic sprinkler system, you must determine how much water the system is applying. First, set cans or cups at various places within one watering zone and turn the sprinklers on for 15 minutes. Pour the water from all the containers into one container and measure the depth of the water to the nearest 1/8-inch. Divide that number by the number of containers used. That is the average amount of water applied to that zone during a 15-minute interval. Set the timer to irrigate the area only as long as it takes to apply ½ to ¾-inch of water. Repeat these steps for all the zones in your landscape.

Proper irrigation will allow your lawn and landscape plants to develop deeper roots, which are needed to help them become more drought tolerant during times of limited irrigation regulations. It will also keep them from developing "wet feet" and contracting a disease or fungus problem. Over irrigation and frequent irrigation cause the plant roots to remain shallow, growing only near the surface of the soil.

The "set and forget" mentality of homeowners with automated irrigation systems must be abandoned. Excessive watering practices leach fertilizers and waste water and energy. Calibrate your irrigation system and get a rain sensor. They are available at your local home improvement center. It's distressing to see water being wasted by sprinklers running during rainfalls and when the landscape is obviously already saturated from recent rainfalls.

Jennifer Welshans
Horticulture Agent
Osceola County Extension Service
1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane