HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

USE SENSORS TO AVOID WATERING DURING RAIN

With Central Florida's hot and sometimes dry climate, it is often necessary to irrigate our landscapes. However, during times of wet weather, irrigation is a waste of a precious resource.

Not only does unnecessary irrigation waste water, fertilizer, pesticides and money, it also may drown plants, causing them to die. To eliminate overirrigation, a simple, inexpensive rain sensor can be attached to your automatic sprinkler 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 and soon after a rainfall.

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

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. Don’t put it in complete sun or shade, and make sure it 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 efficiency. After a sufficient rainfall - greater than a ½ inch - 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 is properly calibrated and applying the correct amount of water to your landscape, your lawn and 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. 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. Pour the water from all the containers into one container and measure the depth of the water to the nearest eighth of an 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 a ½ inch to ¾ of an 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. Overirrigation and frequent irrigation can 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 out 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.

For more information on watering your lawn or other gardening questions, please contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners at (321) 697-3000. They are available Monday thru Friday from 10am to 2pm.

Information for this article was taken from the UF/IFAS publication Residential Irrigation System Rainfall