Check Your Sprinkler System

Photo is special to the Democrat: It's time to make sure your irrigation system is working properly.

Theresa Friday is an Extension Agent with the University of Florida IFAS Extension in Santa Rosa County, http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu/ Send your gardening questions to Ask-A-MasterGardener@leoncountyfl.gov

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There is no such thing as a maintenance-free irrigation or sprinkler system. So, if you have a sprinkler system, it's time to take the winter wrappings off the back-flow value and inspect the whole system.

Make sure that all the sprinkler heads are working correctly. Clogged nozzles can cause dry spots in the landscape. But clogged nozzles can often be cleaned in no time at all.

Leaking lines should be repaired and old nozzles with uneven spray patterns should be replaced. Heads can be moved by lawnmowers bumping them. So check all the heads frequently for alignment. Adjust heads so they're watering only your landscape—not sidewalks, streets, or driveways. Sprinkler heads aimed at these surfaces waste money and water. Adjust sprinkler heads to be at right angles to the soil surface. Tilted heads throw more water to one side, causing dry spots. Make sure heads pop up above the turfgrass canopy. It is not uncommon to have to raise heads a couple of times a year.

You may also want to calibrate your sprinkler system to determine how much water your system is applying in a given amount of time. Many times, we're over- or under-watering our lawns without knowing it. Calibration is an easy process that can be done by anyone.

1. Gather five to ten coffee cans, tuna cans, jars, or other straight-sided containers to catch irrigation water. Containers that are three to six inches in diameter work best.

2. If you have an in-ground system, place the containers in one zone at a time, scattering the cans randomly throughout the zone. (You'll need to repeat this procedure in each zone.) If you use a hose-end sprinkler to water your turf, place the containers in a straight line from the sprinkler to the edge of the watering pattern. Space the containers evenly.

3. Turn the water on for fifteen minutes.

4. Use a ruler to measure the depth of water in each container. The more precise the measurement, the better your calibration will be. Measurements to the nearest 1/8 of an inch should be adequate.

5. Find the average depth of water collected in the containers by adding up the depths and dividing by the number of containers.

6. To determine the irrigation rate in inches per hour, multiply the average depth of water times four.

Now that you know your sprinkler system irrigation rate, you can apply water to your turf more efficiently. In northwest Florida, most lawns will benefit from one-half to three-quarters inch of water every time you water. Only water when the grass blades roll inward and the lawn has areas that appear grayish in color.

For more information on when to water, refer to the UF/IFAS publication, "Let Your Lawn Tell You When to Water." It's available online at http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/ep054

Regular irrigation system maintenance will save you money in water bills and in large repairs that result from neglecting the system. Use these tips as a guide to worry-free irrigation!

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