Prevent water loss with annual maintenance of automated irrigation systems

Automatic irrigation systems are convenient devices. Many homeowners have them installed, set their timers and then tend to forget about them.

However, bliss sometimes turns to shock when homeowners install irrigation systems to conserve water, only to find out that their water bills have doubled or tripled since they installed their systems!

A sprinkler system is mechanical, and we all know mechanical things break, so chances are you’ll eventually discover a minor (or major) sprinkler repair that needs your attention.

Routine maintenance for your sprinkler system is more important than you think. Broken pipes or sprinkler heads are the obvious water and money wasters. The not so obvious problems could even cost you more. Since sprinkler systems should start early in the morning when home owners are asleep or getting ready for work, most home owners will not spot system problems.

Some things that indicate your may have a sprinkler problem includes: weak output, brown spots in your yard during dry periods, the lowest sprinkler continuing to run long after the system has been turned off, wet or soggy spots in your yard or the water meter has a continual slow spin.

So to begin your spring sprinkler system inspection, turn the system on and look for geysers. Geysers usually indicate a broken sprinkler head and should be replaced. When replacing, be sure to look for the cause of the break. Occasionally, sprinkler depth needs to be adjusted to ensure the mower doesn’t damage the sprinkler head.

Make sure the sprinkler heads are properly adjusted. Sprinklers should be watering the landscape, not the street or sidewalk. This problem can usually be corrected by putting in adjustable arc nozzles or simply tuning down the water output from a nozzle.

Look for signs of broken risers beneath the sprinklers. A cracked or broken riser will allow water to boil up around the sprinkler. Sometimes this is obvious--you’ll have a traffic stopping geyser. Another sign may be a hole in the dirt around the sprinkler head.
Inspect the sprinkler “riser wiper seal” for water flow. The wiper seal is a soft plastic seal around the pop-up stem that seals the riser so it won’t leak. It is also responsible for keeping dirt out of the sprinkler body, and is the most important part in determining how long the sprinkler will last. A small amount of water emitting past the wiper seal is acceptable while the system is running. Excessive water flow while a system is operating indicates a damaged or dirty seal. Water flowing unchecked past a wiper seal will cause a loss in pressure and affect the other sprinklers’ performances.

It’s also a good idea to annually clean the spray head filters. To clean filters installed under the pop up stem, unscrew the cap from the body. Don’t allow dirt to fall into the sprinkler body while the riser assembly and cap are removed. Remove and clean the filter.

Also be sure to clean clogged nozzles. Simply flush with water or lightly tap it on a firm surface. While the filter is out, turn on the sprinkler and flush out the sprinkler body being sure that you don’t allow any dirt to flow back into the head. Reinstall the filter and nozzle, turn on the zone and recheck for effective coverage.

Also be sure to test your rain sensor. These devices can help save money and water. These sensors are now mandatory on all new systems. For more information about how to check the rain sensor, call your local Extension Office or visit the online publication at http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/AE221.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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