Friday’s Feature
By
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Rain sensors can help you save money

The heat is on and daytime heating frequently results in thunderstorms. Imagine that you go away for a few days of vacation. While you are away it rains cats and dogs at your home, but your irrigation system is programmed to water. Since you aren’t there to stop it, a lot of water is wasted irrigating a landscape that doesn’t need it! Sound familiar?

Although it is often necessary to irrigate our landscapes during dry weather, it can be a waste of resources using an irrigation system during wetter times. Not only does unnecessary irrigation waste water, fertilizer, pesticides, and money, it can also drown plants causing them to become diseased or even die. To eliminate over irrigation, a simple, inexpensive rain sensor can be helpful.

Automated 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, also called a rain shut-off device, prevents unnecessary irrigation during a rainfall and during periods soon after a rainfall. It interrupts the cycle of an automatic irrigation system controller when a specific amount of rainfall has occurred. They are small devices wired to the irrigation system controller and mounted in an open area where they are exposed to rainfall.

Florida is the only state in the nation with an overall rain sensor statute. Florida Statute states that "Any person who purchases and installs an automatic lawn sprinkler system after May 1, 1991, shall install, and must maintain and operate, a rain sensor device or switch that will override the irrigation cycle of the sprinkler system when adequate rainfall has occurred". If your system was installed after 1991, you need to have an operating rain sensor. It’s the law.

Besides being a law, rain sensors provide many benefits. A rain sensor:

• Saves you money – Reduces your utility bill by stopping your irrigation system after adequate
rainfall has been received.

- Better for your lawn – Excessive watering promotes thatch development, fungal diseases and weeds.
- Conserves water – Rainfall is used to water your lawn instead of fresh drinking water.
- Protects community resources – Stretches our drinking water supply and reduces pesticide and fertilizer runoff into our lakes, rivers and bays and into our underground water table.

Rain sensors are simple devices that operate by one of two methods. One type of shut-off device operates by either measuring or weighing the collected rainwater.

Another type of shut-off device measures the expansion of a water-sensitive material, such as cork disks or leather straps. When enough water accumulates in the rain sensors, they shut off the irrigation systems. When the water evaporates from the rain sensors, the irrigation system will resume operation.

If installing a rain sensor, it is important to place the sensor where it can collect rainfall without being obstructed by overhangs or trees, is protected from the wind and is not located in complete sun or shade.

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 centers.

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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