

Check out your sprinklers

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Many homeowners believe an automatic (or in-ground) irrigation system is the most efficient way to water.

In theory this is true; but, in practice, it's often not the case. A badly designed, or poorly maintained, system can waste a lot of water.

The fact is, 24 per cent of Okanagan water is used by residents on their lawns and gardens. Outdoor watering is where we can have the biggest impact on our water consumption.

Irrigation experts estimate homeowners can reduce outdoor watering needs by 25 per cent just by keeping up with irrigation system maintenance and setting the timer properly. If you're on consumption-based billing, this could also mean savings to your wallet!

So, how do you know if your system is operating efficiently? The first step is to do a basic walk-through of your system. Turn on each zone for 3 – 4 minutes and look for these specific things:

n Where You Water: Make sure sprinklers heads are not watering your driveway or sidewalk, but watering where it is intended, on vegetation.

n Broken Sprinkler Heads: Sprinkler heads are susceptible to damage, and since most people run their systems while they sleep, broken heads often go unnoticed. Inspect your system and replace broken sprinkler heads.

n Distribution Uniformity: A perfect irrigation system would deliver water evenly across your landscape. But wind, slopes, mismatched sprinkler heads and pressure changes can make some areas too wet and other areas too dry. If you have a persistent brown spot on your lawn, it could be the result of poor water distribution. The solution is to fix the system in that zone, not increase the amount that you water.

n Mixed Sprinkler Heads: Rotating spray heads move in an arc. Fixed spray heads do not move. Obviously, a fixed head will deliver more water in one spot over time than a rotating head. Ensure that you do not have rotating and fixed heads watering the same zone.

n Landscape Changes: Inefficiencies can occur when changes are made to landscapes over time, without also making adjustments to the irrigation system. As a result, there may be areas where some sprinkler heads could be replaced with a drip system or even eliminated entirely.

Next, look at your timer.

Timing should be adjusted to the microclimates of your yard: shady areas need less water, moss and excessive thatch are signs of over-watering. A good rule of thumb is 20 minutes maximum per zone. In most cases, any more than that and the water is simply wasted since it has already reached the roots. Also, water between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. to prevent evaporation.

People often ask if they should water every other day, every third day, or on some other schedule.

The reality is you should water only when your lawn needs it, and that can change depending on where you live in the Okanagan, the unique characteristics of your yard, and the season.

Consult with a landscaping or irrigation professional for assistance, and to check your system periodically to ensure it is operating at maximum efficiency. Visit the Irrigation Industry Association of B.C. website for tips on choosing an irrigation contractor and a listing of certified professionals in your area (www.irrigationbc.com/Resources/Selecting-A-Contractor).

Finally, consider changing some of your lawn to drought-tolerant turf or removing some lawn in exchange for low-water, xeriscape plants.

Check out City of Kelowna's Water Smart page at www.kelowna.ca/watersmart for more information on irrigation system efficiency.

For more on Okanagan WaterWise, visit www.okwaterwise.ca.

Okanagan WaterWise is an initiative of the Okanagan Basin Water Board.

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