



## Is Your Lawn too Wet?

Have you noticed lately how wet your lawn is? When you walk across it is it soft, spongy, “squishy” and appear water-soaked? If so, your lawn may be suffering from too much water. Afternoon showers, thunderstorms and tropical storms will be with us into October. We’ve gone from a seasonal drought condition to hot, humid weather accompanied by a lot of rain. Lawns need just so much water and anything more brings on problems. Contrary to some things in life, this is a case where more is not better – its worse! Excessive water promotes rapid growth of lawns, weeds such as sedge and dollar weed, fungus and root rot; shrubs get leaf spot, die back and root decline. Lawns without good drainage become soft and muddy especially in drainage swales between homes.

We can’t do anything about the rainy season but we can manage our sprinkler systems to not add to the problem of too much rain. Lawn sprinkler systems that continue watering on a “business as usual” basis without regard to adequate rainfall waste your money, our water resources and contribute to the downfall of your lawn.

Here are some practical tips to get your lawn through the rainy season in good order.

- **Install a rain sensor irrigation shut-off switch** to prevent your automatic irrigation system from operating during and after a rainfall. One can be bought for around \$25 anywhere irrigation supplies are sold or an irrigation contractor can install one for you. It will pay for itself! *Rain sensors have been required by Florida law on new automatic irrigation systems since 1991.* See our website for rain sensor shut-off switch details. Rebates are available for qualifying Manatee County Utility customers; see below.



Rain Sensor Irrigation Shut-off Switch

- **Three steps to adjust the irrigation controller (also know as the time clock) for seasonal changes.** Lawns need much less irrigation during wet summer

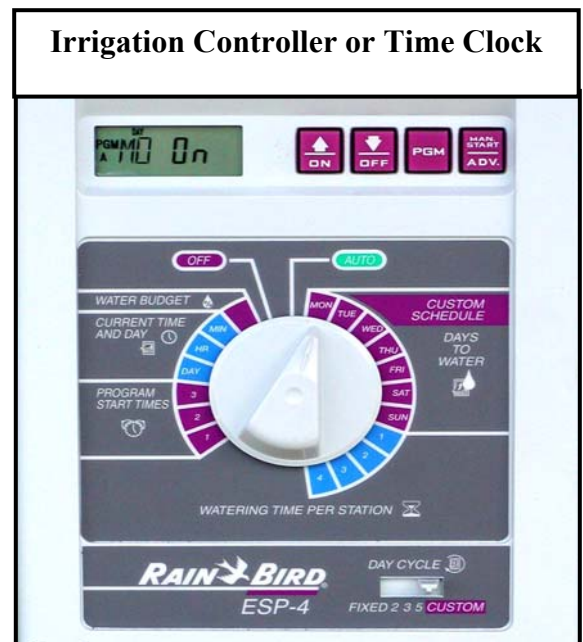
conditions than during our warm, dry spring and fall seasons. Once the basic information such as day of week and current time is programmed into the irrigation controller, there are three important settings to enter which will determine the application of the right amount of water at the right time. For instructions on *how to enter* the information see your controller's label or go to the manufacturer's website for help. Use the 3 steps below to know *what information to enter*.

**I. What Day to Water?** Currently we are on a one-day-a-week schedule determined by the Southwest Florida Water Management District. See the watering schedule in this article for your allowed day. Don't make the mistake of watering on every allowed day; instead water on an as-needed basis. Use a rain gauge to know if ½-inch or more rain has occurred a day or two before your allowed day; if so, turn the controller off and skip an irrigation to help prevent overwatering. True, the rain sensor shut off switch should take care of this but there is no substitute for being aware and involved.

Watering Schedule	
<b><u>Address ending in:</u></b>	<b><u>Water once on:</u></b>
0,1	Monday
2,3	Tuesday
4,5	Wednesday
6,7	Thursday
8,9*	Friday
*and areas with no discernable address	
ref: <a href="http://www.WaterMatters.org">www.WaterMatters.org</a>	

**II. What Time to Start?** Here again the water management district has rules that simplify this decision. For properties less than two acres, water on your allowed day only between 12 a.m. and 8 a.m. or between 6 p.m. and 12 p.m. Watering in the evening encourages lawn diseases due to the grass being wet all night so it is better to water in the morning, finishing within the allowed time (currently 8 a.m.). To find the start time for your system, add up all the run times from the next step, below, and subtract the total from 8 a.m.

**III. How Long to Water?** This is perhaps the most puzzling part, but here's a simple but accurate solution. University of Florida research indicates for most Florida soils, ¾-inch of water will wet the soil to about 8 to 10-inches deep. This, combined with allowing the soil to dry between waterings (easier to do when we're not in the rainy season), is ideal for encouraging grass roots to grow deeper and develop more drought tolerance. However, irrigation controllers use minutes, not inches of water, for setting the station run times. (The terms "station" and "zone" are interchangeable and refer to the area of the lawn that is watered from one valve). So how do you know how many minutes for each individual zone? This dilemma is easily solved by using a simple procedure called *calibration* of each irrigation zone. Just follow these 6 steps:



1. Obtain 6 to 10 empty, clean, open top tuna or pet food cans; mark an indelible line around the inside  $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch up from the bottom.
2. Randomly arrange the cans upright and level throughout the wetted area of zone 1.
3. Start the irrigation system (on your allowed day). See the controller's label on how to manually start a zone.
4. Time how long it takes to accumulate *an average* of  $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch of water in the cans. If some cans are near empty, check and repair blocked sprinkler patterns, clogged or mismatched sprinklers or other uniformity problems before proceeding.
5. Set the irrigation controller for that many minutes for that zone.
6. Repeat steps 2-5 above for all the other zones. It doesn't have to be all done in one session.

Zones using spray type sprinklers usually need between 20 to 30 minutes; rotor type sprinkler zones usually take 60 minutes or more to apply the desired  $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch of water. However, every zone is different and should be calibrated. After observing your lawn for several weeks you may find it necessary to reduce the time a little in zones that are still moist after a week due to shady conditions, swales, low areas or soil that holds moisture longer. For zones with full sun exposure or very sandy soils that dry out quickly may need to be adjusted for a little more run time to balance everything out.

Need help? The University of Florida / Manatee County Extension Service offers a free irrigation and landscape evaluation for Manatee County residents and businesses with automatic lawn sprinkler systems. No adjustments or repairs will be made but a detailed study of your irrigation system and landscape will be done and recommendations to make your system water efficient will be developed and mailed to you without cost or obligation. For more information and an appointment call Cheryl at (941) 722-4524 or see the website.

**Water Conservation Rebates** There are several rebate plans available for qualifying Manatee County Utilities customers. Rebates provide financial assistance for participants to make their landscapes and irrigation systems more water efficient. Some rebate categories reimburse half the cost of water saving improvements up to a total of \$1,250 and qualifying participants can receive a full reimbursement up to \$125 for installing a rain sensor shut off switch if they don't already have one. Use the contact information below to learn more.

For more information about watering, gardening and pests, or for upcoming events visit or call the Manatee County Extension Service office at 1303 17<sup>th</sup> Street W., Palmetto. Phone: (941) 722-4524, email: [jtichenor@ifas.ufl.edu](mailto:jtichenor@ifas.ufl.edu) or visit the website at <http://manatee.ifas.ufl.edu> and click on "[Water Conservation Program](#)".

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