



Controlling Your Controller

Frequently Asked Questions about Managing a Sprinkler System

1. I have an irrigation controller, but I am not certain where it is, so how would I locate it?

Irrigation controllers are usually located in the garage or on an outside wall. They come in many shapes and sizes, but usually have a screen and a dial. If the controller is on an outside wall, it most likely will be inside a waterproof box.

2. I found my irrigation controller, but I am not certain how to turn it “off.” Where can I go for help?

Identify the name and model. The Save Our H2O website has links to the manual page for the most common models of major manufacturers: <http://www.saveourh2o.org/content/manuals-more>.

3. I have checked the Save Our Water website for my irrigation control manual and I do not see it listed under the manufacturer. Where can I go for help?

Search the Internet for the manufacturer’s web site. Most manufacturers have electronic copies of controller manuals posted on their websites.

4. I have turned my controller to “off.” When do I turn it back on and what do I need to do after I turn it “on”?

Wait until the soil is dry 4 to 6 inches deep or the plants begin to wilt. It may take one to three weeks for the soil to dry out after the rainy season ends.

Observe each zone while it is running and check that the system is operating correctly. Make any necessary repairs and maintenance and adjust the irrigation run times as needed. Also see #13 below.

5. Should I irrigate my landscape manually/by hand?

You shouldn’t need to provide any irrigation at this time of year, especially if it is raining or has rained recently. The exception may be container plants that dry out faster than plants in the ground. You can water container plants with water saved in a bucket while the shower water heats up.

6. My water purveyor still allows landscape irrigation. Am I required to turn off my controller?

If it has rained recently and the soil is still moist, your landscape should not need any additional irrigation, regardless of whether your local water district allows outdoor irrigation.

7. My water purveyor offers reclaimed water. Am I still required to turn off the controller?

Your landscape should not need any additional water while it is raining or if it has rained recently.

8. I have a smart controller. Do I still have to turn it off?

No, you shouldn’t have to turn off a smart controller. If it is properly programmed, it should not be allowing irrigation. If the irrigation system is running, the program will need to be adjusted. Consult a landscape professional for help. Properly set smart controllers will start watering again when conditions are right.

9. What if I have drip (or other low volume) irrigation installed?

It doesn’t matter what type of irrigation system you have. At this time of year, your landscape should not need any additional irrigation, especially during or soon after rain.

10. What is the penalty for not turning the controller off?

Penalties may be implemented by your water provider for watering too many days per week, during rain, or for runoff into the gutter.

11. If I own a rental property, who is penalized for violations – the renters or me?

Responsibility for the controller and irrigation system is settled by the renter and property owner. Usually the water supplier will penalize the account holder for water waste violations.

12. How do I report violations?

Contact your water provider. There may be a tip line on the provider website. Most providers will work with property owner to fix a sprinkler system problem before imposing penalties.

13. How do I adjust the irrigation frequency and irrigation time for my controller, and what should be the settings?

To encourage deep rooting and more efficient use of water, allow soil to dry out to the depth of the root zone before irrigating again. Think of the root zone as an imaginary planter box filled with soil and plant roots. During the early spring and fall, the root zone may stay moist one to three weeks, depending on the weather.

Irrigation run times should be long enough to rewet the root zone without having water run off. On some soils, in some circumstances, the run times may have to cycle on and off to provide enough time for the water to soak into the soil. Do this by breaking up the run times. For example, instead of watering 10 minutes one time, water three minutes three times, with a 60-minute break between cycles.

Be sure to check to see if the previous run times were set appropriately for the specific landscape. The irrigation system and schedule should be checked and observed on a regular basis to ensure the system is operating correctly and that the correct amount of water is being applied without runoff. Check your water provider's website for an irrigation schedule based on plant types and the seasons.

14. I see that my irrigation controller has different zones and I am not certain if the irrigation times are too long or too short. How do I find out how to set the duration and frequency for each zone or station?

The best way is to run the system manually and observe what happens. Watch as each zone runs to make sure there are no broken heads or clogged emitters. Enough water should be applied to each zone to thoroughly soak the root zone. Avoid excessive run times that lead to runoff. After each zone is run, check the soil with a soil probe, large screwdriver or a trowel to make sure enough water was applied to wet the entire root zone.

15. I think that I have the correct durations programmed for the irrigation stations, but I get a lot of runoff. What should I do?

If too much water is being applied and runoff occurs, shorten that zone's run time. If parts of the root zone remain dry, then program several start times to provide enough water. Again, be careful to avoid adding too much time and causing runoff. For example, if runoff occurs after only five minutes, set the program for five minutes. Then program two, three, or more start times an hour apart to provide enough irrigation to wet the soil to the desired depth. Some controllers have this feature, called "cycle/soak."

16. What should be the proper settings for my controller?

There is no single proper setting for a controller. Settings depend on the plant type and age, the local climate, soil type, slopes, and the output rate of the irrigation system. For example, spray heads put out water quickly like a shower head, while drip irrigation may take hours to put out a few gallons.

17. How can I tell when it is time to irrigate?

If the plants are starting to wilt, it is probably time to irrigate, but it's a good idea to get to know the soil conditions at different moisture levels. Use a small trowel to dig down four to six inches, grab a small handful of soil and squeeze it. If the soil feels wet, continue to leave the controller off and check the soil again in four to five days. If the soil feels dry, turn the controller back on. During the early spring, run the controller on manual mode with run times long enough to soak soil while avoiding runoff.

18. How do I check the depth of soil wetting?

You can use a trowel or a long screwdriver. Insert it straight into the soil. It will enter moist soil easily, but it will become more difficult to push deeper where the soil is dry. A soil probe is the best way to check, but they

may not be available at all garden centers. Push the probe straight into the soil and retrieve it with a twisting motion to extract a soil sample. You can see how deep the water has penetrated the soil by a change in color (dry is lighter, wet is darker).

19. Can I at least irrigate my trees?

Only when necessary. They shouldn't need irrigation for a long time after rain ceases, since they have more extensive root systems than turf, herbaceous plants, and shrubs. Watch trees for signs of wilting, and then deep water by using a soaker hose or slow application of water. Some trees growing in lawns will have shallower roots. Keep an eye on them.

20. Are there rebates or exemptions for replacing my landscape with water-wise plants?

You'll have to check with your water provider for rebate programs for turf removal, installation of low water-use plants, upgrading your sprinkler system, and other water conservation improvements.

21. Do you offer workshops for the public to learn more about landscape water conservation?

Check your local news source for these programs. Look for home and garden shows and programs at your local nursery and garden center as well. Water providers also may offer workshops. Check with your Cooperative Extension Master Gardeners about workshops.

Top 4 things you can do to conserve landscape water

- 1. Water only when necessary. Let soil dry before watering again.**
- 2. Proper maintenance. Fix broken items quickly.**
- 3. Prevent runoff. Make sure your controller is programmed properly.**
- 4. Mulch bare soil surfaces.**
- 5. Upgrade your older sprinklers to rotary stream and drip irrigation.**



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