

Saving Water Outdoors

**Use what you need,
need what you use**

Saving water outside the home is simple. Over half of residential water use occurs outdoors. Watering wisely outside the home promotes healthier lawns and landscapes. A well-designed and properly maintained Florida landscape will stay beautiful with minimal care.

Here are some ways you can save water outside your home.

First

Water your lawn only when it needs it. The amount of rainfall your area receives should dictate how often you water your lawn and how much water you apply. A hearty rain eliminates the need for watering for as long as two weeks. Irrigation during the rainy season is detrimental — too much water encourages weed growth, fungus and disease.

Outdoor irrigation

Irrigation hours

Water lawns during the early morning or early evening hours when temperature and wind speed are lowest. This reduces losses from evaporation that can occur during the middle of the day. This also allows the water to seep into the ground to the grass and plant roots, promoting healthier plants with deep root systems. Watering early also reduces the potential for disease development.



Become familiar with the watering restrictions in your area. Standard restrictions include no irrigation between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. Additional restrictions may apply. Check with your water management district and your local utility to learn about restrictions in your area.

Outdoor irrigation

Irrigation schedules

Irrigation schedules will vary depending on the type of soil you have and your location in the state. However, as a general rule, Florida lawns need watering only every three to five days in the spring, every five to seven days in the summer and every 10 to 14 days in the fall and winter.



The most efficient way to irrigate your lawn is to irrigate when it shows signs of stress from lack of water. Two ways to determine when you should water are:

Visual and physical inspection — Signs of stress include the lawn turning a bluish-gray color, lingering tire tracks or footprints, and leaf blades are folded in half lengthwise. The soil around the root zone may feel dry.

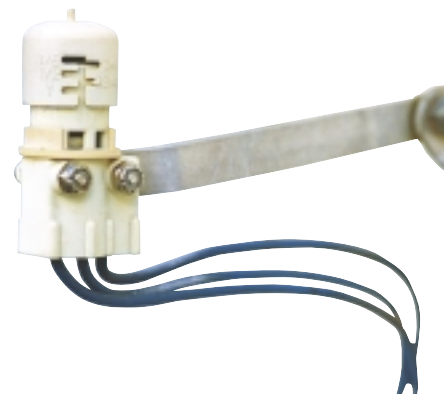
Measuring soil moisture — Sophisticated soil moisture sensors will turn on your automatic irrigation system when water is needed. The more basic soil moisture sensors turn off your system when water is adequate. The reliable soil moisture sensor technology is currently available only in irrigation supply stores.

Irrigation amounts

Apply moderate amounts of water to create a healthy, drought- and stress-tolerant lawn. For most Florida soils, an average of one-half to three-quarters of an inch of water per application is enough to replenish the grass. Saturate the root zone, then let soil dry to encourage healthy, deep root growth.

You can use the “can method” to determine how much water to apply and to see if you are watering uniformly across the landscaped area. Place five to seven wide-mouthed, flat-bottom cans (cans about the size of an average tuna can) throughout the area to be irrigated. Wait 15 minutes, and then measure the depth of water in each can. Average the measurements and use this number to determine how long you need to water to apply one-half to three-quarters of an inch of water.

Be sure your automatic sprinkler system is equipped with a working rain shutoff device, which overrides the system when enough rain has fallen. It automatically resets the system when the turf requires more water. Rain shutoff devices are required by Florida law on all automatic sprinkler systems installed since 1991. Check regularly to make sure the device is working properly and that the corresponding switch in the control box is set at “on.”



Irrigation methods

Irrigation can be done in two basic ways — with a hose and sprinkler or with an inground irrigation system.

When using a hose and sprinkler, place the sprinkler in the area that is driest. Allow the sprinkler to run the proper length of time to apply one-half to three-quarters of an inch of water. When that area is complete, move the sprinkler to another dry area. Place the sprinkler so that its water spray will overlap the area previously watered. Position the sprinkler so that your water lands on the lawn and shrubs, not on paved areas.



Inground irrigation systems can be automatic or manual, or a combination. The automatic system is set for a predetermined time of day and days of the week. Make sure it is set for early morning or late afternoon, set for the appropriate number of days for the season and only operates long enough to apply one-half to three-quarters of an inch of water. Learn how to operate your system. Check timing devices regularly to make sure they are operating properly. Watch for broken or misdirected sprinklers.

Use the appropriate sprinkler head for the irrigated area. Install sprinklers that are the most water-efficient for each use. Rotars or spray heads are good for turf areas, but shouldn't be used in the same zone. For even distribution, flow rates must be consistent throughout the zone. In planting beds, water-efficient methods of irrigation include soaker hoses, micro and drip irrigation, and spray heads designed for planting beds.



Lawn maintenance

Fertilization

Apply fertilizers sparingly and use fertilizers that contain slow-release, water-insoluble forms of nitrogen. The amount of fertilizer you should apply to your lawn depends on such factors as grass species, soil type and permeability, and your location in the state. To avoid thatch buildup, disease and excessive growth and to save water, follow these University of Florida-recommended practices:

- Fertilize in moderation — Typically, a 15-20 pound bag of fertilizer is enough to feed a half-acre lot for an entire growing season. This is enough fertilizer to feed the grass roots without allowing the fertilizer to run off the lawn.
- For bahia grass, apply between 2 and 3 pounds of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet per year in the northern part of the state and between 2 and 4 pounds per 1,000 square feet in the central and southern areas of Florida. For St. Augustine grass, annual nitrogen needs range from 2–4 pounds in the north, 2–5 pounds in the central area and 4-6 pounds in the south. For specifics to your area, contact the local County Cooperative Extension Service.
- Fertilize only during the growing season. Allow a month between autumn application and the time of freeze if possible, allowing new growth to harden off and become less vulnerable to frost.
- Feed in spring with a complete micronutrient fertilizer.
- Use a 1:1 ratio of nitrogen to potassium (the first and last numbers on the bag). Test for phosphorus; apply only if lacking. Florida soil is naturally high in phosphorus, so idea fertilizer is 15-0-15; if not available, use 16-4-8.
- Use pesticides only when needed and just on affected areas.



Mowing

Cut your grass at the highest recommended height for your turf species or the highest setting on your lawn mower. Cut no more than one-third of the grass length to encourage grass roots to grow deeper and grass blades to hold moisture.

Keep mower blades sharp for a clean cut; dull blades tear grass, opening it to disease. Leave short grass clippings where they fall. The clippings reduce the lawn's need for water and fertilizer. Remove thick patches of clippings so that the clippings will not kill the grass underneath.

Waterwise landscaping

Plant drought-tolerant or Florida-friendly grasses, groundcovers, shrubs and trees. Once established, they do not need to be watered as frequently and they usually will survive a dry period with little or no watering.

To establish and maintain a healthy landscape that conserves water, consider using the following Xeriscape landscaping principles:

- **Get a soil analysis** — Collect soil samples from various areas of your yard and have them analyzed by your local county cooperative extension service. This analysis will tell you the level of acidity or alkalinity in your soil. This information will help you decide which plants will work best in your yard.
- **Plan your landscape** — Evaluate the conditions in your yard, such as sunny and shady areas, how you will use sections of the yard and how large you want mature plants to be.
- **Choose the proper plants** — Determine each plant's need for sun, shade, soil and water, and its tolerance for cold or salt. Match the plant's needs to the appropriate spot in your landscape.
- **Use grass wisely** — Grass is often your yard's biggest water user. Save grass for areas where children or pets will play. In other areas, consider mulch or groundcover.
- **Irrigate effectively** — Group landscape plants that have similar moisture needs together in areas separate from grass. Use sprinklers that are the most water-efficient for each use. Zones of inground irrigation systems should be separate for turf and non-turf areas. Use appropriate matching spray heads throughout the zone.
- **Mulch** — Using mulch helps retain soil moisture and moderates temperature. Mulching also helps to control weeds that compete with plants for water. Spread several inches of mulch, such as wood chips, pine straw or leaves around shrubs, trees and flowerbeds.
- **Maintain your yard** — Mow, weed, prune and irrigate as needed.



Additional tips

Pay attention to your hose. Left unattended, a garden hose can pour out 600 gallons of water in an hour.

Check all hoses, connectors and spigots regularly to make sure they are in good working order.



Use a broom to clean leaves and other debris from sidewalks and driveways rather than a hose to wash them down. Using a hose to clean a driveway can waste hundreds of gallons of water.

Outfit your hose with a shut-off nozzle that can be adjusted so water flows only as needed. When finished, turn it off at the faucet instead of at the nozzle to avoid leaks.

Use hose washers between spigots and water hoses to eliminate leaks.



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