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Watering With Kindness

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Over fifty percent of residential water use occurs outdoors, but the grass and plants may use not all of that water. The water that is not taken up by the plants flows off the surface or is washed out of the plant's root zone. This loss contributes to runoff and the pollution problems that come with it, such as algal blooms in lakes, fish lesions, and seagrass damage. However, learning how to irrigate efficiently can reduce the amount of water used in our lawns and the pollution that reaches our coastal waters and wetlands.

The first step is to get to know your irrigation system because not all sprinklers are created equal. Pop-up sprinklers work well for the lawn, while planting beds are more effectively watered using a drip, bubbler, or micro-irrigation spray head. Inspect the irrigation system regularly to check for leaks in hoses, pipes, and fittings because this can waste hundreds or thousands of gallons of water each week. Also repair broken or clogged spray heads and emitters and adjust them to keep them from watering the pavement. Nothing grows on pavement, so water that lands on driveways and sidewalks is wasted and contributes to the runoff problem. Finally, install a rain sensor shut-off switch that overrides the irrigation schedule when there has been enough rainfall.

When you have become familiar with your irrigation system, it is time to turn your attention to the lawn and how much water it needs. Research has shown that $\frac{1}{2}$ inch to $\frac{3}{4}$ inch of water (depending on the species) per application is enough to replenish the grass in established lawns, and the rate of application generally recommended is once or twice a week in the summer and once every two weeks in the winter. By reducing the number of watering applications, the roots are encouraged to grow deeper into the soil and that will make your grass more drought tolerant. When you have decided on an irrigation schedule, water early in the morning before sunrise. This time period will help to reduce the loss of water to evaporation, and gives the grass blades time to dry so fungi do not take up residence.

But remember, you don't have to stick to just an irrigation schedule. Use natural rainfall to your advantage by installing a rain gauge. By tracking how much rainfall your area gets, you can adjust how often you water the lawn and how much should be supplied. You also can water your lawn on an as needed basis by observing signs from your grass and plants.

When the following signs are observed on a large part of your lawn, it is time to irrigate:

- Leaf blades are folded in half lengthwise,
- The grass has a blue-grey tint, and
- Footprints or tire tracks remain visible on the grass long after being made.

By taking a little bit of time, you can reduce the amount of water used in your lawn, which leads to healthy plants, less runoff reaching our neighboring water bodies, and extra money in your pocket.

Contact your County Extension Service for more information about lawn irrigation needs and schedules.