



## Solutions to Avoid Embarrassing Sprinkler Runoff

by Anne Skinner, UC Master Gardener

We all know by now that it's important to conserve water. So it can be a cringe-worthy moment when you discover, maybe after a not so subtle hint from neighbors, that your irrigation system is causing water runoff into the street.

The first step to problem-solving is awareness of the problem! To avoid having wayward water, start regularly checking your irrigation system. Many of us have the system controller programmed to start watering during the night. On the day your sprinklers run, walk around your property early in the morning to check for pools of water or wet areas on the driveway and street. At least monthly, run the irrigation system manually to check for clogged, broken or missing sprinkler heads and misaligned sprinklers.

The next step is to redirect sprinklers to water only the landscape! Check to ensure the sprinkler heads are appropriate, such as a 90 degree spray in a corner as opposed to 180 degrees. For problems with runoff from a slope, decrease the watering time and increase the frequency. For example, adjust the timer to run for 3 separate irrigations of 10 minutes each, instead of one 30 minute irrigation. This allows time for the ground to absorb the water without causing water to be wasted as a result of it running off the soil surface.

Check for leaks! A small leak can waste hundreds of gallons of water per month. For a leak check, turn off all running water inside and outside the home. Check the water meter flow indicator. If the flow indicator is moving, you may have a leak.

Plan your landscaping around site conditions. Planting grass right up to the edge of the curb to the street exposes the plant to heat from the roadway and causes difficulty watering the lawn without runoff. Maintain a turfgrass lawn only where it has a practical function, such as play areas.

In lawn areas with brown spots, perform a water audit using a "can test." Place tuna or pet food cans evenly spaced around the lawn, then run the sprinklers for 20 minutes, measuring the water in the cans afterward. Often, the cause of the brown spot will be a problem with one sprinkler head, not a need to increase the watering time for the whole lawn area.

Minimize planting turfgrass on slopes, which have the potential for runoff. Compacted dry soil, especially on a slope, can cause more than half the irrigation water used, to run off. Soil aeration aids water penetration. Use of groundcover plants, especially at the perimeter of turf areas, helps to anchor the soil and decreases runoff.



Broken sprinkler



Sprinkler can test

Dry creek beds or rock borders on the street side of a lawn area are an attractive and practical solution to runoff and a buffer between the lawn and the street. Such areas provide an easier location to adjust or fix sprinkler heads as compared to those buried in the lawn. There is also less chance of damaging the sprinkler heads with the lawn mower.

Turfgrasses have higher water requirements than drought tolerant shrubs and groundcovers. Check the Master Gardener website for recommended plants for the Central Valley. Fall is the best time of year to plant because the soil is warm, the nights are cooler, and the winter rains give new plantings a chance to set roots before next summer's heat.



Dry creek bed

Irrigation systems require regular monitoring and maintenance, but with attention to a few details, the embarrassment of sprinkler runoff can be avoided.

The Master Gardeners will be in local nurseries during the month of October to answer your gardening questions. Look for us at Luis's Nursery in Visalia on Saturday, October 4; and at Orchard Supply Hardware in Visalia on Saturday, October 18. We will also be hosting a Water Conservation Workshop on Saturday, October 11, from 9am to noon in Visalia, at St. John's Riverwalk (Ben Maddox and St. John's River). We hope to see you there!

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