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ADVICE TO GROW BY » MASTER GARDENERS

For happy plants, keep your drip system well maintained



Liz Platte-Bermeo, with Daily Acts, checks for leaks in the irrigation line at the Petaluma Library garden. CRISSY PASCUAL / PETALUMA ARGUS-COURIER

Question: When I replaced my lawn with low-water-use plants a year ago, I had a drip irrigation system installed with a controller for four different zones. Is there any maintenance I should do before I turn it back on this spring?

Answer: Thank you for this timely question. Yes! Yearly maintenance of your system is very important to ensure your plants get the water they need and water is not being wasted. Check your system early in the spring, before you use it. Also check your city or Sonoma County's drought restrictions, such as when and how much to water.

First, gather your supplies. You'll need half-inch distribution tubing, U-shaped irrigation staples, cutters, a hole punch/insertion tool, pressure-compensating emitters, locking end caps to replace your old figure-eight closures (which tend to leak) and locking connectors. If you're using a 1/2-inch inline drip instead of individual emitters, all you will need are staples, cutters, locking connectors and end caps. Buy your drip irrigation supplies at irrigation specialty stores where quality equipment and expert help are available.

Whether you have a wired-in electric controller with a backup battery or a hose bib/faucet timer that is strictly battery-operated, replace all batteries to prevent corrosion.

Clean the filter for each solenoid valve — a device which regulates the flow of water electronically — even if you are connected to city water. Make sure you have a pressure regulator to keep water pressure through your tubing at 20-40 pounds per square inch.

Now, with one zone of your system at a time, check the irrigation equipment for that zone. First, pull up the tubing, being careful not to disturb any roots. If tubing has been left in the ground for a few years, you may not be able to pull it up. In this case, cut it and start over with a connector on both sides where the tubing is free. If all the tubing is buried and cannot be pulled up easily, cut it at the valve and replace it completely.

Turn on the valve for a zone and check for leakage around the solenoid. Valves should be 12 inches above the highest plant watered to avoid back flow. Replace any broken valves, and check the length of the tubing for damage by rodents or garden tools. Cut out the leaking part and replace it with new tubing.

With the water still running, check each emitter for clogs. Some types of drip emitters can be cleaned with a paper clip. If you can't clear the clog, be aware that inserting a new emitter or a "goof plug" in the same hole will likely cause leaking. Instead, cut out the tubing with the faulty emitter and replace it as you would for a leak. Make a new hole and insert a new emitter.

In densely planted gardens, use inline drip tubing for even water distribution and to eliminate problems such as breakage or dislodging that may occur with single-source emitters.

Determine whether or not the emitters are adequately watering the plants. For instance, if a 1-gallon shrub was planted two years ago and is now a 5-gallon size, add more emitters and move the emitters to the drip line of the plant.

If you are using inline drip tubing, grow your irrigation as your plants grow by expanding the area around plants with more tubing. Place the tubing beneath the drip line or outer edge of the canopy, where the feeder roots are located. This is especially important for trees. They should be on a separate valve because they need to be watered deeper but less frequently than shrubs and perennials.

Flush out the line by opening the end cap and letting the water run for a couple of minutes to rid it of any particulates, catching the water in a bucket to avoid waste. Turn off the water and replace the end cap. Tack down the tubing with irrigation staples.

Finally, to achieve a clean, attractive look for your garden and to cover the irrigation tubing, spread 2 to 3 inches of organic compost or mulch, keeping it 6 inches away from the base of trees and woody shrubs to prevent rot and disease. To minimize fire risk, make sure no wood mulch is placed within 5 feet of any wood structure.

Yearly maintenance will reward you and your garden with efficiently watered plants.

For more information, check out these links: Drip Irrigation — Installation and Maintenance: <https://bit.ly/3iz75q9>

Irrigation System Maintenance: <https://bit.ly/3IGmdfU>

Contributors to this column were Pat Decker, Mary Lou Milkoff and Pat Rosales. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County (sonomamg.ucanr.edu) provides sustainable, science-based horticultural information to gardeners. Send your gardening questions to scmgpd@gmail.com. You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707-565-2608 or mqsonoma@ucanr.edu.