

WINTERIZING YOUR PROPERTY

REDUCING WATER USE DURING WINTER MONTHS

by Jessica Woods

The winter months are a great time to cut back on water use, reduce water bills, and make sure things are running properly and efficiently at your property. Winter is ideal, because during these cooler months, your irrigation system doesn't need to run as often, or at all, and many utilities use the average of the winter water consumption to determine the wastewater charges for the rest of the year. This article will review simple steps you can take to prepare your irrigation system for the winter months as well as what you can do indoors to cut back on water consumption and wastewater charges.

AUTOMATIC IRRIGATION SYSTEMS

Central Texas doesn't typically have the long, hard freezes that are more common to the northern areas of the state, so often "winterizing" the irrigation system isn't as much of a necessity as it is where freezes are more prolonged. In our region, the most valuable adjustment you can make is to reduce the watering schedule or simply turn off the irrigation controller during the winter months. Because the temperatures are cooler, less water is lost to evaporation and transpiration and plants simply do not need as much to replenish what is lost. In addition, winter is typically our rainy season too, so it's best to take advantage of the free, nitrogen-rich rainfall. During normal winter conditions, the irrigation doesn't need to water more than once per month.

If you do want to turn it off completely and winterize your system as a precaution and to ensure water savings, there are a few quick steps to take. First turn the water off to the system at the backflow device or main valve of the system (both are usually located near the water meter). Then manually run each station for a minute or less to blow the rest of the water in the lines out; this eliminates the chance of any residual water freezing in the lines and causing pipe breaks or cracks. Turn the system controller off when all the stations have run and leave the system off for the duration of the winter. Again, this type of winterizing is not always necessary here, due to the lack of long, hard freezes; however, if your irrigation system isn't going to be used all winter, it certainly is worth the time to turn it off and clean the lines out.



MULCH

The landscape naturally goes dormant during the winter months and uses this time to rest and build up energy for the spring growing season. It doesn't require the extra irrigation, unless drought conditions continue and there isn't any winter rain. Now is a great time to reapply mulch 3-4 inches deep around trees, shrubs and other landscaping plants, including in potted plants. Mulch will insulate the plants during the colder temperatures and keep water evaporation low. Add native hardwood mulch, so that when it breaks down, it will add nutrients to the soil.



TOILETS

Did you know that toilets account for about 25% of all water used inside the home? Winter is also a great time to curb your water use indoors by checking your toilets for leaks.

Dye tablets are available free of charge at some water utilities or at a reduced cost from the Texas Water Develop-



ment Board. Food coloring can be used as well. Simply drop the dye into the tank of the toilet and do not flush. Wait at least ten minutes or as long as possible to see if any of the coloring appears in the bowl of the toilet. If coloring does appear, the toilet flapper isn't sealing properly and should be replaced. When purchasing a new flapper, be sure to know the name brand and model of the old toilet.

It may be time to upgrade toilets to new, more efficient models. Typically toilets manufactured prior to 1995 use more water than models currently on the market—3 gallons per flush or greater compared to the 1.6 gallons or less water used by current models. When purchasing a new toilet, look for models labeled as "WaterSense approved". These toilets have been tested and verified to retain their water use over the life of the toilet. Many utilities have toilet rebate programs that you may be able to take advantage of too. Upgrading toilets to more efficient models will save you on both water and wastewater charges for years to come.

WASTEWATER AVERAGING

What is it exactly? Why should you be concerned about it? This is the method that many water providers use each win-

ter (often November through February) to determine what a property's wastewater, or sewer charge will be on their water bill the remainder of the year. The water provider doesn't have meters on wastewater lines, so they have to determine how much wastewater is leaving the property by some method, other than reading a meter. The assumption is that these months are the lowest water use months of the year, as there is no or minimal outdoor water use, due to typical rainfall and climate conditions. Therefore, all the water being used at a property is going down the drain for indoor use (think showers, clotheswashers, sinks, etc.). During the summer months, any consumption above that winter average is not charged additional wastewater fees because it is assumed to be going on your yard or into your pool. This is important to you, because the lower your water use is in the winter, the lower your wastewater charges will be the rest of the year, saving you money year-round.



All the above suggestions are simple to accomplish over the course of the fall months, so that your property will be ready for winter. Taking the time to prepare now can save you money on your water bills and save water too!

This article was submitted on behalf of the Central Texas Water Efficiency Network by Jessica Woods.

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