

Tips to Conserve Water and Keep Your Yard Looking Great

By Amanda Griffin

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Amanda Griffin is the President of Smart Outdoor Services (SOS) and a consultant to the Board of Directors since 2013 regarding ways to reduce Association water usage rates and irrigation expenses. She has been instrumental in helping the Board identify our highest-volume water meters and installing pressure regulators at these locations. The Board is expanding this replacement program further this year, having seen an average usage rate reduction of 29% in test areas. With help from Amanda and SOS, the Association has also installed water flow meters for early leak detection; utilized more detailed programming through smart controllers; and implemented zone mapping and more frequent on-site inspections for leaking heads and valves. If you've been wondering what you can do to reduce your own water usage this summer, read ahead. Amanda provides the following tips for the average homeowner.

What can homeowners do today to reduce water use on their lawns?

If someone wants to do something to save water today, I would tell them to go look at their controller/time clock and to go online to pull up the owner's manual. People are usually surprised at how many features their controller has that they never knew how to utilize. From the landscaping side, I would advise installing hardwood mulch in all bed areas. This helps reduce evaporation and shade root zones. The water that is applied sinks in and lasts longer because of the insulating layer of the mulch.

What is the biggest mistake you see people make when trying to save water?

Probably the biggest mistake people make is assuming that their yard maintenance provider is managing their sprinkler system and schedule. If your yard guy just wants everything to look green, his first response may be to increase the water if something looks stressed. The issue is that a lack of water may or may not be the plant's problem. Weekly mowing service companies may not take the time to turn on every sprinkler to make sure nothing is broken and everything is aimed the correct direction. I can't tell you how many homes our technicians go to where the homeowner says they haven't touched their controller in their garage since they moved in! So much water is wasted by just not paying attention. The average household wastes about 50% of their outdoor water, which is preventable.

Another mistake is that many people, wanting to save water, just turn their controllers to a lower setting. They do so without going outside to look at their system in the daylight, to see what is right and what is wrong with it. Homeowners need to pay attention to where the water is standing or pooling, where it looks like the coverage is less than adequate, and where plants have grown higher than the sprinkler head. Cutting back without studying the system first can sabotage conservation efforts because the homeowner may think, "I just can't cut down the water," and then dial it back up.

But cutting back water use benefits everybody. Homeowners see a reduction in their water bill. Often their plants are actually healthier and more resilient when the water is right, and our water resources in North Texas get some relief as well. I encourage everyone to turn their system on once or twice a month, during the day, and walk around and watch it run.

Do smart controllers really save water?

They certainly can, but they can also waste water. Smart controllers have extra features or use additional data to create a “smarter” schedule for a property. But as with all technology, “garbage in, garbage out.” If the controller is not set up correctly the first time, and if nobody is paying attention to it over time, a smart controller can waste as much water as a regular controller can. It is my experience that many, if not most, smart controllers are not being used in the way that encourages the least amount of water use. That is like saving some random numbers in your phone, then expecting to dial those numbers and reach your mom. It just doesn’t work that way. A knowledgeable irrigation professional should take a look at the settings, know the landscape and where the zones are, set up the system, and then show the homeowner how to adjust the settings as well.

What advice do you have for homeowners who feel like they have already done all they can do to water efficiently?

If a homeowner is thinking he or she has done everything possible to use water most efficiently, I would double check that they have done all of the following: had a professional check their water pressure and made adjustments if needed, upgraded to new nozzles, installed a rain/freeze sensor, matched their sprinkler layouts to their plant types, completed (or hired an irrigator to complete) regular inspections, and converted to drip everywhere possible.

If they have done all that and still want to do more, first I would give them a big hand of applause: we need more people like this to reach the conservation goals set by the water providers in North Texas. Next I would encourage them to look at their plant choices. Adaptive and native perennials use much less water than their annual counterparts, but can still make a home look like a showplace and be in accordance with Stonebridge Ranch requirements. People give up on perennials too quickly. They look best about 3 years in and every year after that, but people want instant results.

If they have done all this, then I would tell them to look to the soil. Building healthy soil is critical to reducing chemical inputs, discouraging weed growth, and having a resilient plant population. There are local companies who offer soil food (not fertilizer) and microbes to add to the soil to encourage the microbiologic community that soils need to support healthy plant life.

Have sprinklers changed much in recent years?

Sprinkler technology has grown in leaps and bounds. Manufacturers are focused on developing products that use water more efficiently, from basic nozzles and heads to specialty nozzles and smart controllers. Even systems that are 5 years old could probably benefit from a light upgrade. If the sprinkler system came with your home, it was likely put in as a very basic system, and making some small changes with some of this new technology can make a big difference in water bills.

What do you wish people knew about their sprinklers or their water bills?

I wish that people would look at their sprinkler systems like other systems in their homes: as technology that needs regular maintenance and adjustments to stay working efficiently. I also wish that they wouldn’t be intimidated by their controller, but would get to know it so that they can take a more active stance in managing their water use. If I could have 3 wishes, my last one would be that people would watch their systems run and adjust their sprinkler schedules once a month. They have to learn their controller in order to feel comfortable doing that. Homeowners can also hire a licensed irrigator who has water conservation in mind to help them manage their water for them.

On the water bill side, I wish people knew that the water they paid for today is the cheapest water they will ever buy. Water resources are limited in north Texas, and we are going to keep seeing rates climb in the coming years.