

Framework topic: Environmental Awareness/Action - The natural and built environments interact with one another over time with intended and unintended consequences. Educating the public on environmental protection and integrating these ideas in our city planning can change negative outcomes of the past and improve our future state.

Sprinkler and Spring Garden Checks: How to Ensure Irrigation and Gardening Success after the Winter

By: Will Hofmann

As winter recedes over the next few months, many homeowners will start to think about managing their personal garden beds and landscaped spaces, and in-ground sprinkler systems will inevitably be turned back on in preparation for hotter temperatures on the horizon. There are a few tips and tricks that will greatly aid in the general maintenance and upkeep of irrigation systems, as well as the health of gardens and the organisms they support.

When sprinkler systems are turned on, check each zone thoroughly to ensure the sprinklers are spraying where they should. Visually inspecting each sprinkler head is vital to address signs of wear and tear and remove any debris blocking the flow out of the sprinkler heads.

Additionally, check for evidence of overwatering and leaks in underground pipes by ensuring there are no overly saturated zones in the lawn or unexplained increases in your water bill. Overwatering could result in increased runoff and groundwater leaching of fertilizers and pesticides, harming both soil health and ecosystem stability downstream in the watershed.

Similarly, try to limit water that is sprayed onto impervious surfaces like sidewalks, driveways, or paved roads. Not only does this result in water damage on these surfaces, but it will also cause excess runoff, wasted water, and higher water bills.

Overall, the goal is to ensure runoff is kept to a minimum, landscapes are healthy, and water is conserved. According to the Holland BPW, Holland residents use over twice as much water during the summer as during the winter. Moreover, during the hottest and driest days of the year, peak daily flow can climb above 30 million gallons per day (MGD), which is close to the water treatment plant's limit of 38.5 MGD and it doubles the average daily flow of roughly 15 MGD. Reducing water consumption and being more efficient will lessen the long-term strain on BPW's water treatment plant, especially as the Holland population grows.

There can also be adjustments made to irrigation systems that are used for watering garden beds. Andrew VanderTuig, who works for the Grand Rapids based native landscaping company Roots Wild, emphasizes the importance of trying to “decrease water in beds where plants may be more established,” as mature plants “have more robust root systems and can tolerate and often benefit from less water.”

The way residents approach spring cleanup can also keep plants healthier. There’s an impulse to clean out gardens at the onset of warmer temperatures, but it is ecologically beneficial to leave some organic matter behind. For the sake of insects and the ecosystems they support, leaving brush and/or dead standing matter in gardens until it gets to roughly 50 degrees consistently during the spring (usually mid-April) is a good idea.

If leaving garden and landscape beds untouched is not possible, brush can be moved into a designated area within the bed to still provide habitat and forage for invertebrates until it gets closer to summer. Some bees do not emerge from overwintering until late May, so the longer this material is left for them to emerge, the better. Andrew from Roots Wild also mentions it’s good to grow more “plant material where runoff may be an issue to capture any ‘lost’ water,” and this bed section can also act as an overwintering base with the increased herbaceous cover already there.

Limiting water usage and providing resources for organisms during the spring are two important ways to serve the community as temperatures warm up. The downstream ecosystem and your local pollinators will thank you!

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