

Sprinkler Tune-up Tips

There are familiar signs that appear in lawns throughout our communities each growing season: brown spots and fungus, to name a few. While Mother Nature can heavily influence the stresses your lawn will experience, there are a few things you can do to your sprinkler system that can greatly improve the condition of your lawn, no matter what Mother Nature decides to throw your way.

The following tips are good for starting up your sprinkler system in the spring, or for diagnosing a problem later in the season.

1. Inspect your sprinkler heads for:

- **Tipped heads** – heads that are not as close to straight (perpendicular to the area they are watering) as possible will spray too close on one side, and too far on the other side. Straighten heads but be careful not to break off the head from the riser.
- **Clogged nozzles** – small seeds, rocks and roots can end up lodged in your nozzle, giving you a gap in your spray. If left alone, this can cause brown spots in your lawn where the water is no longer spraying. Remove by getting a paper clip and plucking them out.
- **Worn out wiper seals** – over time, wiper seals (the white rubber looking piece you see around the top of a spray head) can wear out. They can dry-out, crack and leak. Look for water “blowing by” the wiper seal to identify this issue. Replace the wiper seal if necessary.
- **Broken caps** – a well-manicured lawn comes at a price. Often times the price is a replacement sprinkler head after an edger tore through the cap. After removing the broken cap, verify that the body of the sprinkler (still in the ground) is okay. If it has not been compromised in any way you can leave the body in the ground and replace the cap, wiper seal, stem and nozzle without having to get out the shovel.
- **Geysers** (water spraying straight up in the air instead of out) – your neighbors may have referred to a “geyser” or “Old-Faithful” in their (or your) yard. This generally occurs when the nozzle has broken off and water flows straight up instead of out. A sprinkler pull-up tool is helpful for retrieving stems that are too far down for your fingers to reach. Replace broken or missing nozzles.

2. Check the coverage of your sprinkler heads

- Verify that sprinkler heads are covering all of the area they should. If a stem has been twisted, a nozzle loosened or a sprinkler head unscrewed part way from the riser, the area being sprayed will be affected.
- Check to see if heads are spraying further than needed (spraying the sidewalk, street, cars)
- Distance is a good indicator of trouble. Verify that the heads are spraying as far as specified in the manual, or as far as they once did.

3. Verify that the spray pattern looks good

- Are there gaps in the spray (seed, sand or tiny rock caught in nozzle)
- Misting – pressure is too high. Install a pressure regulator to correct this.
- Pattern looks poor – verify that head is not diffused too far and verify that the nozzle has not gone missing (more common in gear heads)
- Doesn't spray far enough – could be a break in the line. Other issues, new subdivisions/homes reducing the pressure in the area or watering at a busy time of day

- Tipped heads – they need to be as close to perpendicular to the ground in the area they are watering as possible. If the head is tipped, one side of the pattern will hit too close to the head, the other too far away.

4. Broken valves or sprinkler lines

- If your valve box is full of water, it is likely that your valves are leaking or the manifold is leaking. If it is freeze damage, you may need to replace the entire valve or manifold. If it is a worn out diaphragm or solenoid, the fix is generally much easier.
- If sprinklers aren't spraying like they used to, you may have a leak in your lines. This is often difficult to detect and may become apparent only after running a zone for an extended amount of time. If you see a bulge in your grass or feel a very soggy spot underfoot, look for a break in the line
- If pipes pass under hardscaped areas, look for water coming up through cracks in the hardscape as a sign of possible problems.

5. Timer and timer again

- The “set it and forget it” approach to your timer is bad for your lawn and your budget. Watering deeper with less frequency promotes healthy root systems in your lawn. Use the Orbit Watering Schedule tool to determine optimal run times for your system and then adjust your timer accordingly.