

Irving, College Station, Bryan now in Water My Yard program

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Website can help homeowners cut landscape water use by half – or more



Dr. Guy Fipps, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service irrigation engineer, holds an Aggie Catch Can, a device is used to measure how much water a sprinkler irrigation system applies in a given amount of time. On the new Water My Yard website, <http://WaterMyYard.org>, homeowners have the choice of using a such a method, or simply selecting a picture of their sprinklers and entering the spacing between them. (Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service photo by Jose Lopez)

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COLLEGE STATION – The new Water My Yard site has been completely updated, making it even easier for homeowners to sign up, create profiles and better manage landscape irrigation, according to Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service irrigation experts.

“Automated text messaging of recommended irrigation scheduling is new to version 2,” said Charles Swanson, AgriLife Extension irrigation specialist, College Station. “Also, the new version allows homeowners to create multiple zones for their yard, such as a recommendation for the front yard sprinklers and the backyard sprinklers. The original version only allowed you to select one sprinkler type per sign up.”

What hasn’t changed is the basic principle behind Water My Yard, said Dr. Guy Fipps, AgriLife Extension irrigation engineer, College Station.

The Water My Yard project incorporates automated weather stations situated throughout the state that feed data to the Water My Yard website, <http://WaterMyYard.org>. The website software uses evapotranspiration rates – usually

termed “ET” – to calculate weekly irrigation recommendations specific to areas within the district, Fipps said.

Evapotranspiration is a measure of how much water plants, such as turfgrass, trees and shrubs, need in order to grow and stay healthy, Fipps explained. Water requirements depend not only on the type of plant, but also on local weather conditions such as temperature, rainfall, relative humidity, wind speed and solar radiation.

All this may sound complicated, but it’s been made nearly a “no-brainer” for those who are part of a sponsored Water My Yard region, Fipps said

In 2013, the program was first piloted in cooperation with the North Texas Municipal Water District, which delivers water to 1.6 million customers in 13 cities in the Metroplex: Allen, Farmersville, Forney, Frisco, Garland, McKinney, Mesquite, Princeton, Plano, Richardson, Rockwall, Royse City and Wylie.

This year, the city of Irving has also joined the program, Fipps said.

“In addition, residents in Bryan/College Station and surrounding areas can also join the program as AgriLife Extension has received a grant to sponsor Brazos County in the program for two years,” he said

There are other programs available that seek to help homeowners learn to better manage irrigation water, but Water My Yard has one singular advantage over all of them, from a homeowner standpoint, Swanson said.

“Water My Yard is unique in that it tells residents how long to run their irrigation system in minutes,” he said. “Most other programs tell consumers how many inches of water to apply. As the water application rate of sprinkler systems vary tremendously, most consumers still don’t know how long to run their systems.”

To use the application, users first go to <http://watermyyard.org> and enter their location. If their address is included in one of the Water My Yard service areas, they will be taken to the next page to calculate the irrigation rate of their sprinkler systems.

To know how long to run their sprinklers, homeowners need first to know how much water is being applied over a given time, Fipps said. There are fairly simple ways to measure the rate using catch cans, but the Water My Yard web app makes determining rates even easier. Users can click on a picture showing their kind of sprinkler system — multi-stream, rotor, spray or drip – and from the new pop-up page find out the application rate.

Homeowners will need to know two things about their specific system, the manufacturer of the sprinkler and the spacing between the heads. Drop down menus supply the most common brands and spacings.

One more mouse click brings up a watering recommendation time based on location and precipitation rate. The same page will notify the user of any water use restrictions for their area.

On the same page, users will also have the option of creating an account and receiving regular updates. Creating an account requires only a name and email. If the user wishes to receive text messages, then a mobile phone number and provider information is required.

Currently, the Water My Yard service areas are limited to the Dallas metroplex and College Station/Bryan areas. This is because of the initial investment in hardware, mainly professional grade weather stations. Each weather station that meets TexasET Network specifications costs about \$5,500. For a large area, such as the North Texas Municipal Water District, seven weather stations were needed. However, the district decided the potential payback was worth the investment and sponsored the weather stations and the Water My Lawn website, said Denise Hickey, public relations coordinator for the district.

Since 1994, Fipps has been promoting scientific weather station data on websites to promote more efficient use of water in urban landscapes and agricultural crops. Called the [TexasET Network](http://TexasET.tamu.edu), the associated website, <http://TexasET.tamu.edu>, posts daily weather and has tools to determine watering requirements for landscapes and

crops that are available to all.

The savings to a water district and the homeowner can be substantial, Swanson noted. Studies have shown homeowners typically over-water their landscape, often supplying twice the amount of water needed, which can not only be expensive and wasteful, but not always healthful for turfgrass.

And during a drought, when water restrictions are in use, such as one watering once a week or once every two weeks, it can be worse, Swanson said.

“Homeowners often tend to double or triple their irrigation runtimes on their allotted days during these restrictions, which results in runoff and waste,” he said. “Water My Yard takes into consideration how much water the soil can hold and only provides a runtime for that amount. Due to rainfall in June and July, many areas within the NTMWD often received weekly recommendations requiring no watering, allowing for greater conservation during these drought-stricken times.”

Fipps and Swanson are always looking for more municipalities to adopt Water My Yard, they said. They’re also seeking volunteers to help document the water savings from use of Water My Yard recommendations.

“These can be existing users or new users,” Fipps said. “Interested persons should email Charles at clswanson@ag.tamu.edu.”