



Water where you want it

STORY BY JENNIFER STRESIAND
PHOTO BY TOM BAUGUES

It's been a hot summer. Why not give your grass a custom cool-down?

Convenience is the obvious benefit when most people think of installing an automatic home irrigation system, but water conservation and precision are two more reasons to make an investment in the landscape and overall value of your home.

"I think it's worth every penny for the simple fact of the headaches you avoid," says Dan Woodward, a homeowner in the Landing subdivision in Lafayette. "It is so much more efficient to use an automatic sprinkler. Time is money, and that saves you a lot of time."

The words irrigation and automatic sprinkler system are the same, meaning that homeowners can count on the sprinkler turning on at specific times that are programmed by the homeowner.

"Some people have their system run, say, Monday, Wednesday and Friday, and I have mine running twice a week for a longer time," notes Woodward. He had his automatic sprinkler installed by Heads Up Irrigation and Lighting LLC, based in Frankfort, for \$2,400, including all of the parts and labor.

"The automatic sprinkler or irrigation systems sold on the market today have improved technology, such as mechanisms that monitor heat, amount of rainfall and moisture in the soil," explains David Reagan, owner of Heads Up Irrigation. Many of these improvements are geared toward making the sprinkler use less water. In fact, Woodward says his family's water bill has stayed the same or decreased since the system was installed in 2008.

The product is an easy sell to home owners who often make up their own minds before meeting him, Reagan notes.

"They get tired of dragging a hose, spending all of their time watering. Whereas, if you put in an irrigation system, it's going to do all of the work for you."

Contrary to the myth that automatic sprinklers are best placed on larger properties, they run just as efficiently on smaller properties too. Woodward's property is about a quarter acre.

The number of sprinkler heads in-

stalled is really what determines the cost of the overall system, says Dean DeBoy, irrigation manager at Lawn and Shrub, Inc. in Lafayette.

"It's a lot more efficient to water with an irrigation system versus setting up sprinklers and trying to get the same amount of water everywhere," he says.

DeBoy recommends that a professional install the system rather than doing it yourself because what appears to be a simple matter can get very complex.

"Making sure everything is done according to the code of the area," he says. "Also, the sprinkler head spacing - getting your heads laid out correctly." Smaller segmented areas require more sprinkler heads than a larger, wide-open area, which drives up the overall price of the system, adds DeBoy.

"That is why it is so hard to give a price range because every system is different depending on how it lays out."

Usually contractors will have maintenance plans that include checking the system at the beginning and end of each season. These annual visits by the contractor are known as energizing the system in the spring, and blowing out or winterizing the system in the fall.

The energizing process is an overall evaluation to make sure the system is operating properly and the sprinkler heads are hitting the lawn correctly. Winterizing the system in the fall includes "blowing out" all of the water so that nothing freezes when the weather turns cold.

And as with any home improvement project, ask for several estimates before making a decision, says Randy Bellinger, co-owner of Bellinger's Professional Grounds Maintenance in Lafayette.

"Taking the lowest bid is not recommended," he adds. "Irrigation is definitely one of those things that you 'get what you pay for.' Some contractors will use off market valves and cut corners on putting in a system that will prevent you from getting years of dependable service," Bellinger says. He suggests asking the contractor for references and then following up by calling the references to confirm the service and dependability of the contractor.

Another important factor to consider is how much and which areas of the lawn and landscape to cover with an irrigation system, Bellinger says. Since the cost is often deter-

mined by how many sprinkler heads are installed, this becomes an important issue financially and for the overall look and health of the lawn.

"Having landscape beds irrigated can drive up the cost of installation when those areas won't require that much water a year or two after the landscape plants become established," he says. Oftentimes, then, a homeowner will choose not to have the landscape beds irrigated.

Some brands that Greater Lafayette contractors use for irrigation systems are Rain Bird, Toro and Hunter. Evaluate the controller that comes with the system so that you will feel comfortable operating it. Irrigation systems are not thought of as a luxury item today because of the need to conserve water and to be more efficient with the water resources we do have, explains Bellinger.

"It takes away the human error of watering too long or not long enough. You don't have to have all of the bells and whistles on an irrigation system to get the job done. Those extras cost money, so don't feel like you need to buy them unless you like bells and whistles," he says. However, a rain sensor is one extra that should always be included on a new system and installed on an older system to ensure water conservation, Bellinger adds.

The benefits of an automatic sprinkler system are a beautiful lawn for the entire season without the labor of dragging a hose to different sections of your lawn each time you water it.

"It was the best thing we ever did to our house," Woodward says. "I don't have to sit up and wait until 10:30, 11 at night running water non-stop." *

Consult the experts:

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