

Tune Up Your Community's Irrigation System – Final version going into March 2003 Apartment News

With warm weather around the corner, now is a good time to think about tuning up your community's irrigation system. Proper maintenance is easy, and it can help prevent future problems before they become expensive.

Depending on the age of your property or the length of ownership or management of it, you might not have any record of past repairs or changes to the irrigation system. Where do you start when you're unfamiliar with an irrigation system? First, find the point of connection. This is where the backflow preventer, or vacuum breaker, separates the irrigation system from the water supplier's system. The device protects the water supply from contamination, and most municipalities require annual testing and inspection of the device. Make sure other staff members know its location, because in emergency situations this is how you shut down the entire irrigation system. If your community does not have a set of plans showing where the irrigation system components are, make a map and label it with the locations of the backflow preventer and the rest of the system parts.

Next, locate and map the controller and all the valves. Include information on what area each valve waters on your map (Make sure to write down which direction is north). Note the type of irrigation equipment, such as sprinklers, rotors, pop-ups, bubblers or drip, and what each is irrigating. For example, "Station 1: Pop-ups on turf along Main Street" or "Station 12: Drip to trees on the southwest corner."

Now it's time to tune up each station. It's a smart idea to run the irrigation in an area where recent maintenance occurred to verify that there was no damage to the system. Oftentimes, sprinkler heads break during mowing. When this occurs, landscape crews or on-site staff sometimes replace them with mismatched heads. Because different types and brands of sprinkler heads have different precipitation (water application) rates, using the wrong head reduces their efficiency by causing over- and under-watering on that particular station.

Sprinkler head height and alignment also create water waste. Heads that pop up need to clear the height of the grass and stand straight. If they don't, the spray pattern will not cover the intended area. Keeping spray off sidewalks, parking lots and buildings is a good way to save precious water and money.

Clean and inspect each system's filters and thoroughly flush the drip stations by removing the end caps. If emitters are not properly functioning, clip them off while the system is running. This helps to clear any remaining debris in the delivery tubing. Be sure to cap off irrigation in areas containing dead plants. Cleaning, flushing, replacing and adding emitters as the plants grow should be all that a drip system needs in the way of a good tune-up.

Taking these steps before the heat of summer will keep your irrigation system running smoothly. Good water management is everyone's responsibility in the desert. Not only is it the right thing to do, but it also helps control costs.

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