

Irrigation systems are becoming more and more commonplace in urban landscapes. Whether a simple sprinkler system dedicated to the watering of lawns, or plant-specific drip emitters for planting beds, irrigation systems can be found in many new or newly renovated gardens throughout the Albemarle/Charlottesville region.

When designed, installed and operated properly, these systems are efficient tools in providing supplemental water to landscape material. They can be designed to operate in zones that are set specific to the needs of a plant, and can be set to run only during times when evaporation is at its lowest rate. Water can be applied right at the base of the plant, thereby reducing the occurrence of disease. Irrigation systems can be set to water only when atmospheric conditions dictate, and when rainfall has been lacking. Certainly, there are many benefits to an irrigation system.

Unfortunately, there are also many downsides. While the majority of irrigation contractors are well-informed and well-intentioned, there are also those who are less dependable. They may install a system with unnecessarily high water demands, set the system to run excessively, design a system that sends water to impervious surfaces, or most unfortunately, not take the time to educate their customers on the proper use of the system.

Of course, blame for poorly operated irrigation systems cannot be placed only on the shoulders of the irrigation contractor. Homeowners can be at fault as well. In some instances a well-meaning homeowner will adjust his irrigation system because he thinks that "more is better" when it comes to water or because he wants to watch it work rather than have it run in the early hours of the morning while he is still in bed. A constant challenge exists as to how to educate consumers to be responsible stewards of the land and their own irrigation systems.

The Albemarle County Service Authority has tried many approaches to encourage responsible use of irrigation systems. The Authority has offered training sessions to industry professionals, has provided educational information to customers and run radio and television ads encouraging responsible watering. Rain sensors have been required for all irrigation systems in order to prevent water from being applied during or immediately following a rain event. A rate structure has been implemented to reward those who use water conservatively with lower rates and encourage conservation by instituting higher charges for greater consumption. All of these efforts are working on an individual homeowner basis, yet the amount of water consumed for irrigation purposes continues to grow.

This community's growing dependence on public water for irrigation became particularly evident this past summer and fall. Water used for irrigation purposes accounted for nine percent of all water used by Albemarle County Service

Authority customers in October. That is more water than is used by all of the Authority's institutional customers combined.

In an effort to stay ahead of this growing need, the Authority has taken an additional step in hopes of promoting conservation and responsible irrigation water use. Beginning January 1, 2006, all new irrigation systems shall be required to be served by a dedicated connection. In most instances the charge for a dedicated service connection will be the actual cost of the connection, the cost of the meter, and where applicable, the Buck Mountain Surcharge. By requiring a separate connection, the Authority hopes to have better control over the sizing of irrigation meters and the consumption they measure. All customers proposing to install irrigation systems shall first submit plans to the Authority for approval and meter sizing. Currently the Authority has the power to restrict water use during an emergency, but these changes to the Rules and Regulations also allow for the discontinuance of irrigation service in the event of willful and wasteful uses of water.

In conjunction with irrigation contractors and homeowners the Authority is striving to promote the benefits of well-designed and maintained irrigation systems and limit irrigation practices which use excessive quantities of water. Working together will allow for the continued enjoyment of irrigated landscapes.