

High, Low, and No - Tech Solutions for Vacation Irrigation

How to Make Sure Your Irrigation Flows While You're on the Go – an Irrigation Planning Guide for the Vacationing Gardener

Leaving your garden during the growing season can be a stressful ordeal for most. Nevertheless, there are a few ways to ease your mind about your garden, while enjoying time away. There are solutions for all budgets, scenarios, and situations.

The ideal solution is actually one of the no tech solutions: finding a friend or neighbor who is a gardener and would be willing to come over and look after the garden while you're away. Even someone who isn't a gardener is good because any water is better than no water at all. If you do not have a friend or neighbor who can help, try contacting your local Master Gardener for suggestions or join a gardening group that will take turns helping each other out during the vacation season. Asking for help through social media can also be a great solution. However, it is very important to remember that you should never broadcast online when you will be out of town and that no one will be home. Remember to be vague online, then clearer to the person you find and trust to help.

For those interested in a more complex permanent solution, an automated irrigation system involving several zones may be the best way to go. The system can include drippers and sprays to apply the correct amount of water in the right ways to the correct areas. The two most important things to remember on these systems are: (1) they are only as good as the controller running the system; and (2) more plants die from overwatering than under watering. Knowing the weather forecast and adjusting for any rain conditions helps prevent waterlogged roots. Some controllers allow for the attachment of a rain gauge that can turn off an irrigation system until the area dries out enough to require more watering.

For a less expensive, lower tech and all around simpler solution involving only a few simple parts, you can use a battery-operated timer with a garden hose and sprinkler. This allows one sprinkler to cover an area while you're on vacation. These can work wonderfully and still allow for both large and small area irrigation but make sure the timer has fresh batteries. For larger areas you may need to replace the simple yard sprinkler with a tripod-based elevated impact spray to reach longer distances. Make sure no trees or shrubs block the water from getting to critical areas. The two important things to remember with this method are: (1) weigh down or stake the tripod sprayer, to make sure it doesn't fall over while you are gone, creating a mess of the area where it falls; and (2) for container plants, make sure to move them into a shady spot to slow down evaporation.

Sometimes the simplest solutions can also be the best solutions. If automated irrigation systems are out of the question, then another no tech solution may be the way to go. Water bladders are a great solution for larger trees and shrubs. For flowerbeds, a soda bottle or milk jug with one or two small holes in the lid filled with water and buried upside down, will allow the water to seep out into the surrounding ground. For container plants, fill a kiddie pool with about an inch or two of water then place your containers in the pool in a shady area. For those with small patios or indoor plants, this same idea can work for you, using your bathtub. This works via capillary action with the potting soil pulling the water up into the root zone.

Mark A. Wilson
Assistant Extension Agent – Horticulture Specialist
Northwest Region