Most homeowners want a nice green lawn. A lush healthy lawn displays obvious pride in ownership. Keeping a lawn green and healthy can be easier said than done. That’s especially true in Nebraska where weather extremes are the norm. During the summer of 2012, many lawns went dormant and some died due to extreme drought. Frequently irrigated lawns generally fared much better than non-irrigated turf. This led to a perception that healthy lawns required frequent supplemental irrigation to thrive. As a result many lawns that receive irrigation, especially from automatic in-ground systems, are overwatered.

Few homeowners blatantly overwater their lawn. But I’ll be the first to admit, programming my irrigation controller is difficult. What does 15 minutes of irrigation mean anyway? How frequently do I need to water when I know the weather frequently changes? I don’t want to be that neighbor with my irrigation system running during a rainstorm. I’ve done an irrigation system audit, adjusted and fixed the broken irrigation heads, and installed a rainout switch to prevent my system from running after a rainfall event. It still doesn’t assure me that I’m not over watering. Ultimately I decided simply to turn the system off and manually run it when the lawn looked dry.

This method has worked well so far. Frequent June rainfall meant I didn’t need to water until July. The grass has looked great and I saved water and money. Slight water stress, especially during spring, actually improves lawn health because it preconditions the turf for summer stress and reduces growth rate. This translates in better summer drought tolerance and fewer mowings. The turf finally showed symptoms of drought stress during the Fourth of July weekend. Symptoms of light drought stress included a blue-brown color and footprint marks. Turf on south facing slopes and around tree bases was the first to show drought symptoms. Sticking a screw driver into the ground confirmed the soil was getting hard and dry. I waited another day and then manually watered my bluegrass lawn with between 0.5” and 0.8” of irrigation. All drought symptoms quickly disappeared and I turn the controller back to “Off” and watch for drought symptoms to return.
This type of irrigation management works well during wet years. All it requires is simple monitoring for drought symptoms. Then irrigate deeply to re-wet the soil to a depth of 4 to 6" and turn off the system. On dry years, when drought symptoms occur frequently, consider programming the irrigation system to run a few minutes every other day. This is called deficit irrigation. The goal is to replace only some of the water lost to evapotranspiration. Eventually drought symptoms will re-appear and can be easily corrected with another deep irrigation cycle. Turf compromised by root-feeding insects, root-infecting pathogens, and highly trafficked turf should not be deficit irrigated because these plants can’t utilize soil water a deeper depths. However, deficit irrigation is well suited to most home lawns. This type of irrigation can save a significant amount of water and money. Don’t rely solely on automatic irrigation controllers. You’re the best irrigation controller; water when you see drought symptoms.

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