Irrigation Systems

If you are new to Arizona or even if you are a native desert dweller, enough can not be said about the importance of knowing your irrigation system. To follow is a discussion of the various components of an irrigation system.

The backflow preventor, or pressure reducer, is usually made of brass, sits above ground 2-3 feet, and is located on the same side of the house as the electric valve. The backflow preventor, or BFP, has two functions as its name implies. It prevents water that sits in the pipes of your irrigation system from entering your house and contaminating your inside drinking water. It also reduces the water pressure coming into the irrigation system to prevent damage to the valves, pipes, and drips. Examine the BFP for leaks. Turn a valve on with the clock. It is normal for the BFP to leak a little when the valve comes on and goes off, but this should stop after a few seconds. Continued dripping is a sign of freeze damage and will need attention.

Next, let's look at the controller. This is the brains of the irrigation system and allows us to program when and how long our plants water. There are a number of kinds of controllers in use in our landscapes. The first question to be answered is, do you know how the thing works? If you have lost the manual, most are available online. Many of these controllers have a back-up battery which needs to be changed out twice a year. If the existing battery isn't fresh, change it now and note on your calendar a similar chore in six months.

The third component of the irrigation system to check is the valve(s). These are usually located in an underground box. Inside you should see the valve with a couple of wires running to a cylinder-shaped gizmo on the top. As long as everything looks ok, no leaks, no splitting or other obvious damage, you are probably fine. Put some time on the controller and turn the valve on. You should hear a hissing or other indication that the valve was activated by the controller. If not, about the only thing you can easily do is make sure the wire nuts connecting the valve to the controller are making good contact. In the damp environment of the irrigation box they often get corroded.

Armed with this new knowledge, you are ready to turn on your system for at least long enough to walk your yard and inspect each & every plant that is being serviced. If you see a good stream of water at the end of the drip, life is good. If you do not, sometimes all that is necessary is to twist the dripper back and forth. Some are designed to clean themselves in just such a fashion. Should a repair be necessary and you are a do-it-yourselfer at heart, it is simple and inexpensive to replace damaged emitters. Just cut the ¼" black tubing with a small pair of nippers and install a new drip.

Also, keep an eye out for wet spots where there are no plants. Perhaps it is a buried drip where a plant used to be, or maybe a break in the ½" main line. Unused drips can be easily plugged. A series of breaks running parallel to your line may mean your poly is getting old and in need of replacement. A hand trowel and a little investigating often times can help determine the source of your wet spot.

Nonetheless it goes without saying, water is a precious resource. Taking good care of your irrigation system is an important step in being a responsible desert dweller.