Steps for Winterizing Your Sprinkler System

Step 1: Shut Off the Water

It will be no surprise that the first step is turning off the water to the system with the main valve, usually found near your water meter. If your system has valves to prevent backflow, shut these off, too. Two of these valves generally lead into the backflow device; be sure to shut them off. If your system doesn't use potable water, it might not have a backflow preventer.

Step 2: Turn Off the Timer

If your system runs on an automatic timer, make sure you shut that off, too. Some systems have a "rain mode" that allows you to power down the timer without losing any programmed information or settings. Allowing the system to run in rain mode throughout the winter is usually safe and shouldn't run up your energy costs. You can turn the rain mode off in the spring, and the timer should resume working normally.

Step 3: Drain the Water

It's not enough to keep water from flowing into the system; you also need to drain the water already there. This is the most important and time-consuming process, but it's vital. There are three main methods of drainage depending on what type of sprinkler system you have.

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Manual Draining

Some sprinkler systems may allow you to drain the water manually. These systems have shut-off valves at low points or ends of the piping. Make sure to wear eye protection while completing this step because the water supply in the system is under pressure. Slowly open the valves one at a time, let the water run out, and then close them when finished.

Automatic Draining

Other systems have components that will automatically drain the water once the main valve is shut off and the water pressure drops. You can usually activate the system by running one of the sprinkler heads with the water supply off.

However, there will still be some water trapped within the valves themselves. Locate the solenoid on each valve—a plastic cap with wires from the top—and loosen it. This will allow air to flow into the system and water to flow out.

Blow-Out Draining

Some sprinkler systems allow you to hook an air compressor up to the pipes to force the remaining water out of the sprinkler heads. However, this method is destructive and even dangerous when tried on a sprinkler system that isn't built for it. Additionally, it's worth mentioning that a typical DIYer's air compressor might create the 50 PSI (pounds per square inch) of pressure needed to clear out PVC piping. However, at-home machines can't usually generate the 10 CFM (cubic feet per minute) of the volume necessary to quickly and completely blow out the water.

For these reasons, we don't recommend attempting the blow-out draining method alone. Even if you don't damage the system, you might not get the job done thoroughly, and even a little water left in a sprinkler system over the winter can cause problems. Hiring a professional for this job is a once-a-year cost that's well worth it.

Step 4: Insulate Above-Ground Components

Finally, ensure that the sprinkler system's above-ground parts are adequately insulated from the weather. The main shut-off valve, plus any exposed pipes or backflow preventers, should be wrapped in foam covers or insulation tape. On the backflow preventers, make sure not to block any air vents or drain outlets.

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