

Irrigation Winterization: A Must-Have Service Add-On



Source: www.TurfMagazine.com

As the sun dips below the horizon sooner, and the weather cools, you must prepare your clients' sprinkler systems for the onset of freezing temperatures. Irrigation system winterization is a profitable and much-appreciated bridging service. Many contractors schedule irrigation winterizations after fall cleanup and before the winter holiday lighting and snow removal season.

Craig Otto is the owner and operator of Irrigation Otto, a full-service irrigation service provider based in Minneapolis. He also instructs part time for Rain Bird. He tells the students attending his Rain Bird classes that winterization services are an absolute must for systems facing hard freezes. Providing additional seasonal adjustment services is a little more debatable.

"Many clients with newly installed irrigation systems have a 'forget it' mentality when it comes to adjustments of their irrigation systems seasonally," Otto says. "When customers with a newly installed irrigation system find their pipe fittings, sprinkler heads and valves split or cracked and broken apart from frozen water left in their systems, coupled with rising water bills come spring, they then start paying for winterization services."

Richard Silverman begins winterizing for his clients in October and finishes up by Thanksgiving. Silverman is owner of Rain Rich Sprinklers, an automatic irrigation company on Long Island's north shore. His firm services residential, commercial, golf, green roof, LEED and agricultural properties.

"After Thanksgiving, the weather can change quickly and get very cold very fast causing the ground to freeze to several feet below the surface," Silverman explains. "When temperatures get below freezing, we can't winterize properly. The water freezes in the nozzle of the sprinkler heads and we can't purge the system very well. We then have to wait for a few warm days to

arrive, and hopefully we can blow out the system before there is any damage. We constantly remind our clients to winterize earlier rather than later.”



[Click image to enlarge.](#)

An experienced, licensed company, such as Hydroscares, based in Pottsdam, Pennsylvania, has the expertise and equipment, such as this compressor, to winterize irrigation systems.

Photo: Hydroscares

Great times to sell winterization

Rain Bird recommends selling a winterizing service when installing a new system or when taking on a new client. Winterization, in terms of preventing damage to the system, is the most important service a contractor can offer to customers. Many contractors send out service agreements no later than early September. They follow up the service agreements with postcard reminders, emails and social media.

David Shoup, product manager of control systems for Hunter Industries, says that winterization services may or may not be possible to bill separately, but is a great way to maintain customer contact in the off-season. It’s also a good opportunity to make add-on sales and solicit references for new customers. “A seasonal tune-up helps ensure proper system operation when contractors have time to deal with it, instead of during the busy summer months,” he says.

Philadelphia-based Hydroscares, an irrigation company providing landscape irrigation and drainage services, has always priced its systems based on their size and complexity (i.e. number of zones). The firm modifies prices if a customer has exterior spigots, a pond, a sink or other water features that require winterization.

“Geographic proximity to an office or storage yard can also be factored in,” says James Giardina, operations manager for Hydroscares. “Having a pre-established price chart is critical in the retail market as many new prospects will call up, looking for a blind quote for service and this gives an easy and consistent means for office personnel to immediately assist and hopefully schedule service.”

Most of the well-trained and highly specialized irrigation contractors like Rain Rich, Hydroscares and Irrigation Otto agree that the service field is flooded with unqualified service providers wanting to make a quick buck in winterization. For this reason, Otto is a big fan of licensure and maintenance requirements in the irrigation industry, providing it is workable and affordable for the company. He admits it is difficult for municipalities to enforce, but they are getting more stringent as water conservation becomes more front and center for them.

Otto finds weatherization pricing all over the board. "You need to sell your knowledge and capabilities," he says. "What trained and certified contractors can offer versus their fly-by-night competitors is their service. Convince them (clients) that you will be there for any problems come spring."

Rain Rich finds its winterization services growing each year – about 10 percent of its revenue – as it installs more and more sprinkler systems. It now installs more than 100 every year for its 80 percent residential/20 percent commercial customer base. Rain Rich also installs irrigation systems for golf courses, usually several systems each season.

"Most of our customers know they have to winterize their sprinkler systems," Silverman says. "Like many people, they have multiple responsibilities and this is just another job they have to do. They put it off until they hear the weather is going to be real cold and then they all call at once."

Don't Blow Out During Blowouts

When using the blowout method of irrigation winterization using compressed air, safety is crucial. Compressed air can cause injury as a result of flying debris, particularly to the eye area. Always wear ANSI-approved eye protection.

Here are some valuable **"do NOTs"** to follow when conducting irrigation winterizations, according to Hunter Industries.

1. Do not allow the air pressure to exceed 80 PSI for systems with PVC piping and 50 PSI for systems with polyethylene piping.
2. Do not leave flow sensors installed. Always remove them first and seal the pipe to avoid damage to the sensor.
3. Do not stand over component parts (pipes, sprinklers, valves, etc.) while the system is pressurized with air.
4. Do not leave the air compressor unattended.
5. Do not blow the system out through a backflow or pump. First blow out the system, then drain the backflow or pump.
6. Do not leave the manual drain valves open after the blow out.

Silverman finds the market in New York City and Long Island very competitive with a constant flow of new, unlicensed companies offering irrigation winterization services at rock bottom prices each year.

"Unfortunately, there are many unlicensed handyman companies that take advantage of this service and winterize systems without compressors and do it incorrectly," Silverman says. "The downside is that there is no recourse for customers who run into problems when using unlicensed contractors who don't guarantee their work. If they (fly-by newcomers) screw it up, their customers won't know until the spring."



[Click image to enlarge.](#)

PHOTO: IRRIGATION OTT

New wrinkles to aid winterization

Otto hasn't seen much change in winterization products and techniques over his 25 years in business, but finds most new systems have a seasonal adjustment feature on them. "Smart controllers are becoming more popular and even mandated in some municipalities," he says.

Giardina agrees that while most of the winterizing process has remained pretty much the same over the past decade, he has run across a few improvements that have maximized his company's efficiencies.

He points to quick-connect compressor hose attachments and test cycle options for automatically cycling through each zone during the blowout. Giardina says that technology, such as controllers with remotes or enabled smartphones, is handy. "It is great for our techs to carry while walking the system as air is blown through so they can make timing adjustments on the fly," he says.

Shoup recommends the use of program backups now available on many irrigation timers. He says that saves the controller setup – the water days, start times and run times. "Making a backup program allows you or your crew to restore the controller to the original setup when warmer weather arrives again," he explains.

Don't Forget About Controllers

After draining an irrigation system by the appropriate method, protecting the system's controller helps complete the winterization process.

Rain Bird provides some great tips on protecting controllers in winter on its website at http://www.rainbird.com/documents/turf/ASC_Fall00.pdf. Here are a few of the key points about system shutdown:

Turn the system off.

- For a controller with a programming dial, leave the controller and backup battery plugged in to keep watering programs intact, retain heat inside the unit and resist condensation that can harm the circuit board.
- For a digital controller, system/off or auto/ off will leave the program in the memory. Disconnect common wires that connect the controller to valves and/or the pump start relay. Why? A power surge or prolonged power failure could cause the controller to default to the automatic mode, sending a signal to the control valves or pump to come on. Unplugging the controller and disconnecting power will erase programs, but you can reprogram clients' controllers the following spring.

There are many other tips involved based on the type of system and controller a customer has-for instance, if the system has a backflow preventer or a

water pump. Each client's system may be different so knowing the details of winterizing each type of system will ensure smooth and solid service throughout the season.