

DRAG. DROP. CLICK. IRRIGATE.

PC-based controllers add a new layer of efficiency

By Elizabeth Lexau



During his tenure as a landscape manager in California's Marin and Sonoma counties, Tom Campbell noticed something alarming. The tremendous overuse of water in landscaping made him jump into action and start a new company dedicated to eliminating water in irrigation.

Now, as owner of Water Scout, Campbell runs a successful business built around applying the best technologies available for efficient irrigation. Among the most important technologies in his practice are irrigation controllers that can be operated via PC.

"My clients love this," says Campbell, who uses a web-based irrigation control system. "If they need to adjust their schedule or if they have a problem, I can help them at a moment's notice, as soon as I have access to a PC. Without this system, I'd have to schedule an appointment."

A web-based system is just one example of the way computer technology is putting science into efficient irrigation while taking the time and guesswork out. Computers are making it possible for water managers and property owners to operate their systems with just a few clicks of the mouse. Remote PC systems enable contractors to adjust irrigation schedules and monitor several properties without ever leaving the office. New products are also bringing computer control technology into the scope and price range of the homeowner.

The convenience and time-saving benefits are obvious, but one of the biggest advantages of these systems lies in water conservation. This is why Campbell got involved.

"Like a lot of places, water management is a big issue in Marin County," says Campbell. "Many consumers continue to think that water just comes from the tap, even if they're constantly reminded that there's a limited supply. I'm trying to educate people to show them that they can have their lush, beautiful gardens, but they can be practical about it. They don't have to waste water."

Computer-operated controllers are one key to this reduced waste because they make an easy task out of precise, flexible, plant-specific watering schedules. By combining a variety of smart technologies, they can help eliminate inefficiencies while delivering the optimum amount of moisture needed for beautiful landscapes.

Most computer-controlled systems have useful water management features built in. Some can be tailored to accommodate the specific plant needs, soil type, exposure, slope, and other conditions found at each zone. Many systems can be programmed to make automatic adjustments based on evapo-transpiration (ET) data. ET controllers have been in use for a number of years and numerous studies have demonstrated that they help customers realize significant water savings. Combining this proven technology with an easy, convenient computer interface adds another level of savings.

PC control for all kinds of customers

PC control comes in a variety of flavors. Large central control systems enable a single manager to operate several controllers from a single PC. These systems are designed for irrigation specialists who manage a number of different properties or for large organizations such as school districts, municipalities, or industries that have several irrigation sites under one management umbrella. With central control, one PC can remotely control all aspects of one or more controllers in the field.

"It's a fantastic, easy-to-use tool," says Campbell of ET Water's system. "My ten-year-old can do it. If someone calls me up to say, 'I'm putting in my vegetables now,' or 'I've re-sodded an area,' I can set up their watering program from my computer. If they're using a controller that's not web-based, that usually means I have to make a long drive."

ET Water web-based controllers feature a number of water management features, including weather-based watering schedules. Rainfall and ET adjustments can be made automatically, based on zip code-specific weather data collected from local weather stations.

Providing the correct amount of water in mixed plant settings can be a challenge. In many landscapes, plantings with lower moisture requirements are often over-watered to allow for the highest need plantings on the property. The ET Water web-based system allows users to enter a landscape profile for each station. Data related to sprinkler type, plant type, slope, sun exposure, and soil type are all entered to create a customized profile for each zone. The system can then be tailored to respond differently to the needs of each area.

ET Water offers a residential program that can control up to sixteen stations and a commercial version that manages up to forty-eight stations. "If you're a large landscape contractor, you can log on from anywhere and get a report on anything that's happening on any one of your sites," says Steve Snow of ET Water. "This is very important from a customer service standpoint. If a customer calls to report trouble, you don't have to go and check it out. You can look at the specific zone from your own computer, make adjustments and let the customer know instantly what the problem is, and what will be done, or has been done, to correct it."

