

Landscape irrigation goes hi-tech

Petaluma's HydroPoint takes the work out of watering the garden, saving money and conserving water at the same.

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Technology has always looked for ways to improve quality of life. From cell phones to Internet shopping, society has enjoyed the convenience of a myriad of modern devices over the past several decades.

Up until recently, one household chore remained unimproved by technology – irrigation. For avid gardeners, a self-watering landscape has been just a pipe dream, but Petaluma-based HydroPoint Data Systems, Inc. has taken on the challenge and developed Weather TRAK, a weather-controlled irrigation system able to calculate a customized watering schedule based on satellite weather information, soil type, plant type and other land features.

"It's the future of landscape irrigation," said Chris Manchuck, vice president of business development for HydroPoint. "It uses satellites and wireless technology in an industry which was dirt and wire. It's really not cutting edge. The technology has been available in different places for quite a while, but we just saw an opportunity and brought them together."

HydroPoint was founded in October 2002, but got its start in 1996 at Network Service Corporation. NSC developed the Weather TRAK system and Manchuck, along with two other partners, decided to acquire the company and take it national. "When we came in they had an engineering team with 30-plus years of experience. We had the background in media, customer service and data management and thought we could take it to the next level."

The self-watering system consists of a controller that operates the sprinkler valves. Each day HydroPoint's Everywhere Data Service collects real time weather updates from weather stations across the country. "We provide very local weather data," said Manchuck. "We take information from weather stations in your area to create a weather map for your neighborhood. It's the same technology used by the U.S. military for their weather modeling."

This information is then broadcast to each Weather TRAK controller at night. The controller then plans a watering schedule for the next day based on this data plus landscape specifics. Because the system is able to water this precisely, Weather TRAK reduces water usage by up to 50 percent and saves the user money by eliminating water waste through runoff and over-watering. At the same time, landscapes are kept healthy and looking good.

"Weather TRAK asks the user what they're watering, such as trees, flowers or other plants, and applies just the right amount of water for them," said Manchuck. "It takes into consideration soil type, slope and shade, and adjusts the watering schedule accordingly. It

knows exactly when, where and how much to water. We've seen in some studies up to 59 percent savings in a year."

While the system is being sold to both residential and business customers, it's not surprising that HydroPoint's biggest clients are landscape contractors who are looking for a way to maintain landscapes while saving their customer's money on their water bill. "Landscape contractors can use this as a tool to transform their business," said Manchuck. "Here's a great solution for them and something that's right for the planet."

Manchuck said the system is also user friendly, but if a client needs assistance, help is readily available. "We pride ourselves on customer service. Customer service comes first, then the technology. It's our business model. We want our customers to feel confident, happy and to trust us. It's a big part of the business that we saw was necessary. When they need help, our 800 number is easy to find and someone's always there to help."

The company's high tech irrigation system has been creating a stir from coast to coast and was recently picked up by the Toro Company for national distribution. "That will take us to a whole new level of education and acceptance with Toro behind it," said Manchuck. "Toro has a huge national presence and a great reputation. They'll be selling our product this fall."

The smart irrigation system offers a solution to issues of water conservation, convenience and money savings while maintaining a beautiful landscape. The state water agency will also be promoting a rebate program for installing systems such as Weather TRAK.

"We're hearing more and more about water crisis," Manchuck said. "The problem is growing, and as the population grows, our ability to supply water becomes harder. Conservation is very important. As the same time, people want to have a choice of turf and flowers, but want it in a cost-effective manner. As water rates increase, people have less choice because landscape becomes expensive to maintain. Weather TRAK is a tool that allows them to maintain the landscape of their choice in a responsible manner. It's a win-win solution for everyone."

For more information on Weather TRAK or rebate programs, call (800) 362-8774 or visit www.hydropoint.com.

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