

Water Use, Restrictions & Savings: Toronto Lawn Irrigation Analysis

Toronto's 2026 water rates, the Chapter 851 outdoor-watering rules, and a seasonal savings model for typical Toronto lawns

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ABSTRACT

This report assembles Toronto Water's published 2026 rate structure, the outdoor-watering provisions of Toronto Municipal Code Chapter 851, and published outdoor-use statistics, then models how much water a typical Toronto lawn consumes across a growing season and what eliminating that irrigation is worth at the city's combined rate. Every input is drawn from a cited public source; every modelling assumption is stated where it is used.

We find that irrigating a 500 sq ft lawn through a 24-week season uses about **27.9 m³ of treated water (roughly \$136 at Toronto's 2026 Block 1 rate of \$4.8629/m³)**; that Toronto has **no standing mandatory watering schedule** — only voluntary once-a-week guidance under a 2000 Council policy, plus the General Manager's authority to declare restriction orders during shortages; and that the honest cash saving is meaningfully larger here than in neighbouring Peel municipalities, because Toronto's combined rate is roughly double theirs. The stronger case remains restriction resilience and an end to the waste the U.S. EPA puts at up to 50% of outdoor water use.

KEY FINDINGS AT A GLANCE

\$4.86/m³

combined Block 1 rate,
Toronto Water 2026

27.9 m³

modelled seasonal
irrigation for a 500 sq ft
lawn (24 weeks)

≈\$136/yr

cost of that irrigation at
Toronto's 2026 rate

up to 50%

of outdoor water lost to
wind, evaporation and
runoff (U.S. EPA)

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1 Toronto's water system and the 2026 rate structure

Toronto Water is a single-tier municipal utility: the city treats and distributes drinking water and collects and treats wastewater under one bill, with no separate sewer charge. Toronto is unusual among GTA municipalities in this simplicity — neighbouring Peel and York Regions operate their own layered rate structures. In 2026, after a Council-approved 3.75% increase for Block 1 effective January 1, residential customers pay **\$4.8629/m³** if the bill is paid on time, a combined charge covering both supply and treatment [1].

The Block 1 threshold covers all consumption up to 5,000 m³ — well above any household's annual use — so the full rate applies to every residential cubic metre, including every cubic metre run through a sprinkler. A typical household consuming 230 m³ per year pays about **\$1,118 on the 2026 combined bill**, up \$40 from 2025 [1].

Table 1 — Toronto residential water rates, 2026. *Source: [1].*

Component	Basis	2026 charge
Block 1 (on-time payment)	all consumption up to 5,000 m ³	\$4.8629/m ³
Block 1 (late payment)	all consumption up to 5,000 m ³	\$5.1188/m ³
Block 2 (Industrial Water Rate)	over 5,000 m ³ per year	\$3.3219/m ³
Typical household bill	230 m ³ /yr, on-time payment	≈\$1,118/yr

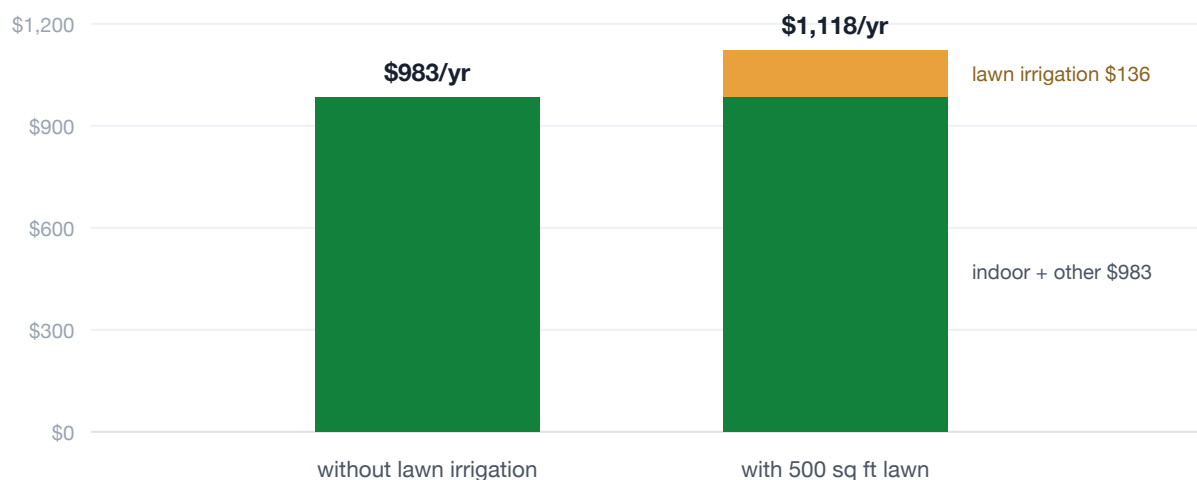


Figure 1 — Anatomy of a Toronto water bill at 2026 rates, annualized. Only the amber segment changes when a lawn stops being watered. *Derived from [1]; assumptions in \$M.*

2 Outdoor watering rules: Chapter 851 and the voluntary approach

Under Toronto Municipal Code Chapter 851, Water Supply (By-law 1392-2007), section 851-14 authorizes the General Manager of Toronto Water to issue a water use restriction order during an actual or anticipated water shortage [2]. Such an order can limit or ban lawn watering, pool filling, vehicle washing and outdoor misting, with possible exemptions for new sod, seed and newly planted trees; violating an order is an offence. Year-round, section 851-14(A) prohibits water waste — defined as watering that causes excessive pooling or runoff into gutters, streets or storm drains [2].

Beyond those provisions, Toronto has **no standing mandatory lawn-watering schedule**. Since a July 2000 Council decision, the city has relied on a voluntary Summer Outdoor Water Use Policy: water lawns at most once per week, during off-peak hours between 11 p.m. and 8 a.m. [3]. Council deliberately rejected standing odd/even mandatory rules after staff found they raised consumption and enforcement costs elsewhere — a common source of confusion for residents moving between Toronto and neighbouring York or Peel Regions, both of which enforce odd/even schedules [3].

LOCAL CONTEXT — CHAPTER 851 AT A GLANCE

No standing schedule. Voluntary once-a-week guidance each summer. The General Manager's restriction order power under s. 851-14 has been available since 2007 but was not activated in the 2026 season.

Under a declared shortage, a natural lawn either goes unwatered or its owner risks an offence. An artificial lawn is indifferent to both states.

3 How much water a lawn actually uses

The U.S. EPA's WaterSense program puts outdoor use at **more than 30% of average household water consumption**, and estimates that **as much as 50% of outdoor water is lost to wind, evaporation and runoff** from inefficient irrigation [4]. In Ontario, Statistics Canada survey data cited by the Ontario Water Works Association indicates that **61% of homeowners irrigate their lawns** and 84% irrigate their gardens [6]. The Region of Waterloo records that summer water use can increase up to 50% because of outdoor watering [7].

For a seasonal model, this report applies the widely used horticultural guideline of **2.5 cm of water per week** across a 24-week southern Ontario growing season (May to mid-October) — a stated assumption, not a measurement (\$M). That is 60 cm of depth per season, or 0.6 m³ per square metre of lawn. Applied to the reference 500 sq ft (46.5 m²) backyard, the model yields **27.9 m³ per season**.

Toronto's climate softens but does not remove the need. The Pearson Airport climate station records 785.9 mm of annual precipitation, well distributed across the year, with August the wettest month at about 78 mm [5]. But summer rain arrives in intense convective bursts — much of which runs off rather than soaking in — while July's average high of 27.1 °C drives evaporation between storms [5].

4 The savings model for a typical Toronto lawn

Table 2 applies the Section 3 model to three lawn sizes spanning Toronto's typical backyards — from the narrow semis and rowhouses of the old city (as tight as 13 ft wide by 66 ft deep) to the deeper lots of North York and Scarborough postwar subdivisions [10]. At Toronto's 2026 Block 1 rate of \$4.8629/m³, the cost per season is volume × rate; ten-year figures are simple undiscounted sums.

Table 2 — Modelled seasonal irrigation and cost by lawn size, Toronto 2026 rates. *Derived; assumptions in \$M.*

Lawn	Area	Seasonal irrigation	Cost/season	10-yr, undiscounted
Compact yard	300 sq ft (27.9 m ²)	16.7 m ³	≈\$81	≈\$813
Typical backyard	500 sq ft (46.5 m ²)	27.9 m ³	≈\$136	≈\$1,355
Large or deep lot	700 sq ft (65.0 m ²)	39.0 m ³	≈\$190	≈\$1,897

The cash case at Toronto's rates is meaningfully larger than in neighbouring Peel municipalities, whose combined first-tier rate is about \$2.37/m³ — roughly half Toronto's. Even so, irrigation savings alone do not pay for a turf conversion; they are one component of the broader ownership-cost picture. The stronger arguments are restriction resilience, consistent appearance through dormancy periods, and the elimination of the waste the EPA documents.

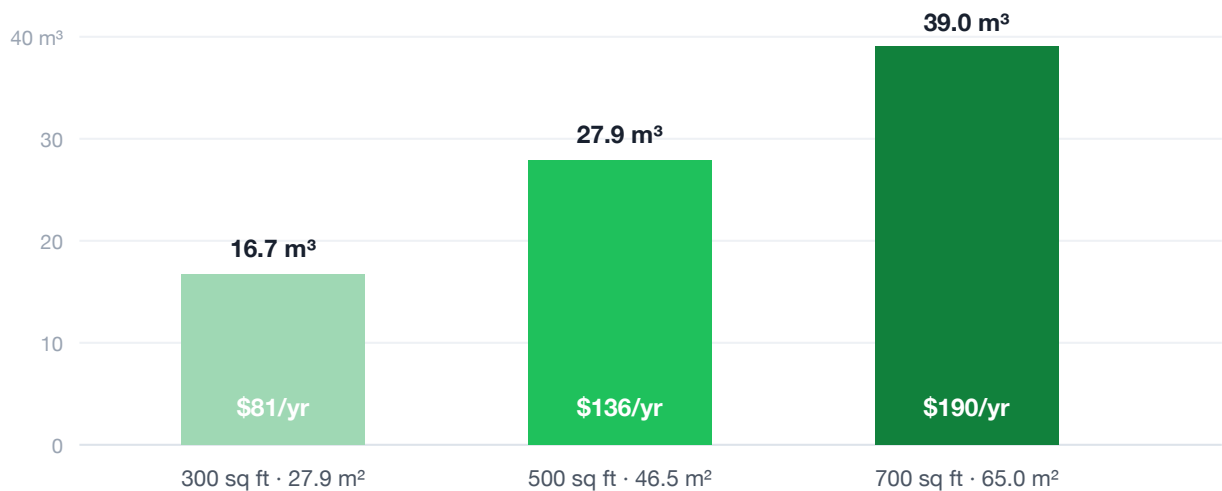


Figure 2 — Modelled seasonal irrigation volume per lawn size (bars, left axis), with the annual cost at Toronto's 2026 Block 1 combined rate of \$4.8629/m³. *Derived from [1]; assumptions in \$M.*

5 Drought summers and restriction-proofing

Toronto's rainfall statistics hide a timing problem. The summer of 2024 set a monthly record at Pearson — 215.4 mm in July alone, surpassing Hurricane Hazel's October 1954 — and the year overall was the wettest on record at the station [9]. Yet summer precipitation arrived in intense bursts too fast for soil to absorb: on July 16, roughly 97.8 mm fell in a few hours, flooding the Don Valley Parkway and Union Station; on August 17, 128.3 mm — the rainiest single day in Pearson's recorded history [8][9]. A lawn can flood on Tuesday and be parched within a fortnight.

In that pattern, the binding constraint on a natural lawn is rarely a bylaw — it is behavioural. Toronto's voluntary once-a-week guidance [3] asks owners to do precisely what drought-stressed grass tempts them to ignore. Each July, the practical choice is between a browning lawn, watering more often than guidance recommends, and accepting dormancy. Artificial turf removes the triangle entirely: it needs no irrigation to stay green, is unaffected if a restriction order is declared under Chapter 851, and its only water use is occasional rinsing.

Scale, honestly stated: if every one of Toronto's roughly 270,600 single-detached homes irrigated a 500 sq ft lawn on this report's model, the seasonal total would be about 7.5 million m³ — roughly 2.8% of the 269 million m³ the city's 1.16 million households consume in a typical year at 230 m³ each [1][10]. Eliminating lawn irrigation is a household-level saving and a resilience measure, not a fix for city-wide supply.

One caveat deserves note. Synthetic surfaces run hotter than living grass in sun, and where owners choose to cool turf by rinsing, some of the modelled saving is given back — in one arid-climate study, water-cooling artificial turf demanded as much water as natural turf in that environment [11]. Toronto's humid, lake-moderated summers are far from arid, but the honest saving is the volume a household would genuinely have irrigated, not a theoretical maximum.

LOCAL CONTEXT — NO LAWN-REPLACEMENT REBATE

No lawn-replacement or water-wise turf rebate was found for Toronto; the city's environmental incentive programs cover basement flooding protection (backwater valves, sump pumps), not turf conversion. Homeowners should treat any "water rebate" pitch for lawn conversion with scepticism.

M Methodology & data sources

This is a desk-research report. Published figures were collected in August 2026 from the sources listed under References: Toronto Water's 2026 rate pages and the Council-approved interim rates announcement, Toronto Municipal Code Chapter 851 (Water Supply) and the July 2000 Council report on the Summer Outdoor Water Use Policy, U.S. EPA WaterSense statistics, Environment and Climate Change Canada climate normals (Toronto Pearson Int'l A, 1981–2010), the Ontario Water Works Association Outdoor Water Use Manual, the Region of Waterloo's outdoor-water guidance, the 2021 Census via the City of Toronto planning backgrounder, and the TRCA's 2024 severe-storm report.

Stated assumptions (not sourced facts): (i) irrigation model — an actively maintained lawn receives 2.5 cm of water per week over a 24-week southern Ontario growing season, i.e. 0.6 m^3 per m^2 per season (a widely used horticultural guideline, consistent with the Region of Waterloo's one-inch-per-week endorsement [7]); (ii) all modelled irrigation falls within Toronto's Block 1 pricing; (iii) the combined Block 1 rate of \$4.8629/ m^3 applies to every modelled cubic metre (Toronto Water is solely funded by rates and user fees; there is no separate sewer charge); (iv) lawn sizes of 300/500/700 sq ft follow the project ranges published in GTA installer guides; (v) ten-year figures are undiscounted nominal dollars. Derived figures combine these assumptions with the cited rates (volume = area $\times$ 0.6; cost = volume $\times$ \$4.8629); changing any assumption changes the results proportionally.

Limitations

The irrigation model is a guideline-based planning estimate: real households water less, more, or not at all, and Toronto's 785.9 mm of well-distributed annual precipitation reduces irrigation need in normal summers. EPA figures are U.S. national averages used for context, not local measurements. Because Toronto has no standing watering bylaw, restriction scenarios are illustrative of declared shortage orders rather than routine seasons. Synthetic surfaces can run hotter than living grass, and any rinsing or cooling reduces net savings. This report is not an engineering, agronomic or financial assessment of any specific property.

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