Penn State's Hamilton develops new mulch 'crucial to turf seedbeds'

UNIVERSITY PARK, Pa. — Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences has developed a new mulch for landscapers and turfgrass professionals.

Pennmulch, a mulch made entirely of paper, is being marketed only to commercial professionals and landscapers. A starter fertilizer can be combined with the product so that fertilizing and mulching is done in one step.

When wet, the pellets expand to several times their original size so that a small amount covers a large area. Also, because the mulch is made entirely of paper, there's no danger of seedbeds being contaminated by weed seeds, he said.

While Pennmulch currently is marketed only to commercial operations, Hamilton hopes to make it available to homeowners soon. "The product has a large marketing potential," he said.

A Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture survey shows that in 1989 homeowners spent nearly $19 million on grass seed.

"Pennmulch has great possibilities for retail because it can be sold in any size bag, it is shipped and stored much more easily than traditional mulches and the shelf life is unlimited," he said.

"Although it was designed for use in grass seedbeds, we're looking into other uses, such as vegetable gardens and ornamental plantings." Research on the product began three years ago with a Ben Franklin Partnership Environmental Technology Fund, which included in-kind support from the College of Agricultural Sciences.

Pennmulch is being manufactured by Penn Mulch, Inc., of Pittsburgh. Last fall, 50 tons were produced and about 40 tons were sold to turfgrass and landscape companies.

"We're researching new sources of paper, development of a low-cost pneumatic spreader to apply the mulch, and variations of the product containing fertilizer and grass seed," Hamilton said.

"We're also implementing an extensive marketing plan. I'm confident Pennmulch will establish a niche in the industry."

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