

MARKETING IPM FOR LAWN CARE
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IPM - BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Integrated Pest Management (IPM) is a system of plant management that utilizes a variety of strategies to maintain plants in a healthy and vigorous state.

As applied to turf, IPM utilizes the following strategies:

- proper site placement
- proper site preparation and establishment practices
- species and cultivar adaptability and resistance to pest problems
- proper cultural practices (irrigation, mowing, fertilization and cultivation)
- pest management

All of these strategies are combined or "integrated" to manage turf in a healthy and vigorous state. The acronym TEMP which stands for Turfgrass Environmental Management Program has been coined to describe this system of management. No one strategy necessarily takes precedent over another. Like the pieces of a puzzle, all are critical to complete the entire picture of turfgrass management.

However as you descend down the list of strategies, flexibility for impacting long term turfgrass management decreases as fewer management options are available. Poor decisions during site placement, site preparation and establishment or grass selection will often lock you into a management system that may not be desirable agronomically, environmentally or financially. Conversely, good decisions at these early stages can have a dramatic positive impact on future turf management and a subsequent reduction in costly inputs including pesticide use.

As turf managers we often inherit the mistakes of others made during the early stages of planning, preparation and establishment of lawns. Poorly prepared, compacted subsoils are an all too common reality we encounter in lawn care. Inappropriate species or cultivar selection, poor establishment practices and timing or establishment in areas not well suited culturally to turfgrass may also be complicating factors for long term turfgrass management.

A realistic level of expectation for the lawn area and a knowledge of the necessary inputs and time frame required to overcome site and establishment problems should be conveyed to the customer.

This in essence takes us "off the hook" for a slow to respond or problem lawn. It also changes our focus and the focus of the owner or property manager away from a single season approach to a long term management plan. Communication thus becomes a critical factor with an IPM approach to lawn care.

Cultural practices are what most lawn care managers have direct influence over. It is here that most planning and program development should take place, even in areas like mowing and irrigation that may not be directly implemented by the lawn care manager. The best fertilizer program will do little to improve a lawn improperly mowed or watered. Proper cultural management in all areas must be communicated to the responsible party.

Pest management is the final piece of the puzzle. IPM is not about eliminating pesticide use. IPM is concerned with proper and responsible pesticide use in the context of turfgrass management. Pesticides are a tool necessary for the level of lawn care that is expected by consumers but pesticides should not be the main focus of a lawn care program.

The efficacy and cost of modern pesticides have made them the first choice in many lawn care manager's minds when a problem occurs. A degree of tunnel vision has developed which makes us blind to the complete picture of turfgrass management. Pesticides have become our quick fix at the expense of good management practices. But pesticides remain an important tool too valuable to lose through our carelessness or short sighted approach to lawn care.

WHY IPM - PRESSURE FOR CHANGE

Many pressures exist for modifying our traditional lawn care practices into practices based on an IPM philosophy. These pressures continue to increase and this trend is not likely to reverse in the future. These pressures for change can be categorized into the following general groups:

- Public perception
- Environmental
- Governmental
- Agronomic
- Financial

Public perception of pesticide use often is negative. A perceived threat to health and safety from pesticides exists in the minds of many consumers. Television, radio, newspapers and magazines continue to sensationalize and exaggerate health effects from pesticide use with little effort made to report information from a scientific basis or to report the benefits of lawns. Because traditional lawn care programs focused on the use of pesticides, it became easy for the mass media to simplify lawn care into a pesticide spray operation rather than a total management system

Adding weight to this negative public perception are a host of environmental concerns. Several studies purport to demonstrate a weak link between 2,4-D use and the incidence of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma in humans. Much debate centers around these studies due to their methodology (recall studies) and the conclusions they draw. Unfortunately a great deal of press followed the most recent studies conducted by the National Cancer Institute (NCI) in Kansas and Nebraska farm workers. The controversial conclusions drawn by these studies were reported as scientific fact.

A recent study on 2,4-D use in relation to canine lymphomas also conducted by NCI made front page headlines in most papers and again was reported as scientific fact despite similar controversy to the human studies.

Also fueling environmental concern is an Environmental Protection Administration (EPA) study identifying certain pesticides in groundwater found in monitored wells. Many of the pesticides found are common to the lawn care industry.

As a response to the negative public perception of pesticides and the environmental concerns raised, the government on the national, state and local levels has become involved. Lawn care tends to be a very easy and visible target to focus upon. Recent state regulations 636, 637 directly impact lawn care. Many local communities have attempted to enact local ordinances regulating lawn care

operations. While most of these local ordinances were effectively challenged on the basis of jurisdiction, the recent United States Supreme Court decision Mortier vs. Wisconsin seems to give the green light to local pesticide regulations. Also of concern is the continuing process of EPA pesticide reregistration that may jeopardize some of the common materials used in lawn care.

A less visible pressure for an IPM approach to lawn care is one of agronomics. A traditional lawn care program is not sound agronomically. Research continues to demonstrate the importance of a total management approach to lawn care. The impact of pesticides beyond the target pest is also better understood. Often this impact is negative and works to complicate lawn management.

Finally, IPM makes sense financially. A reduction in pesticide use saves money. When a subsequent increase in pest management and increase in lawn health, vigor and quality results, additional financial returns are realized.

Savings are both short and long term. An increase in competitiveness especially for the small to mid size operator can also result with an IPM approach to lawn care. With improved competitiveness and reduction in costs comes increased profits. Additional services can be offered with an IPM approach and in fact additional services fit very well into an IPM system. Additional services can help to improve market share by increasing the customer base and can also increase the revenue generated per customer.

IMPLEMENTATION OF AN IPM APPROACH

IPM is a philosophy. In order to implement an IPM approach in your lawn care operation you must believe in the benefits of IPM and understand the concept. Often this concept is easy to understand but it may be difficult to figure out a way to implement it. A traditional lawn care approach is easy to implement but makes little sense when you stop to think about it. The difficulty in implementation is what prevents many operators from making what seems to be a risky and dramatic change in operations. The beauty of IPM is that it allows a progression of change from a traditional lawn care approach where every lawn gets the same treatment at a certain time of the year to a degree of IPM that fits the comfort level of the particular business. An "all or nothing" attitude is not necessary with IPM. Believe in the philosophy, understand the concept and begin to incorporate IPM principles into your business at the pace that suits your operation.

To understand how to implement an IPM approach in lawn care, it is easiest to look at a purer and more complete IPM program rather than the pieces that can be incorporated into your individual operation. There are four basic steps in implementing an IPM approach to lawn care:

- Initial lawn inspection
- Development of a management plan
- Monitoring and treatment based on the management plan
- Evaluation and modification of the management plan

The initial lawn inspection should be as detailed as possible to provide accurate and thorough information for the development of the management plan. Information that is helpful includes: grass species and cultivars, current mowing height, current irrigation practices, soil profile and texture, soil drainage, soil test information, weed populations, disease activity, insect activity, date of establishment, establishment method, and the expectations of the owner or property manager. This information may take a very short time to accumulate on smaller sites but may involve a lengthy inspection on larger sites. Individual sites may have variation within the site as to particular grass species, soil types or other factors which should be noted.

Once this inspection information is compiled, a management plan can be developed. It is this management plan that provides specifications and recommendations for the season. Included should be cultural recommendations, even if direct responsibility for the implementation of certain cultural practices like mowing or irrigation does not lie with the lawn care operator. Likely, fertilization will be the lawn care operator's responsibility and any recommendations and test results like soil testing should be included. It is here that pest predictions are made and control strategies developed.

While this plan development may seem daunting to do on a lawn by lawn basis, much of this information will be common to a majority of lawns. This facilitates the development of specific management sheets applicable to most lawn care situations encountered. Likewise, information sheets can be developed on particular problems. So it becomes a matter of deciding what information applies to the specific lawn and compiling and personalizing this information from a broader "library" of topics. On smaller sites the management plan can be written out at the time of inspection or a management sheet can be supplied with the appropriate items marked. Larger sites may require more input and a lengthier report which may best be done separate from the inspection visit.

Once accepted by the customer, the management plan can be implemented. Typically a series of visits are required at which time problems are monitored and certain treatments are applied. Fertilization based on the site inspection is considered a treatment. Other services such as aerification and overseeding can be scheduled as part of the programmed visits. Pesticides are applied based on the predictions made in the management plan and the activity noted at the time of the visit. In essence each visit becomes an inspection. Pesticides, when applied, should be targeted to high risk areas or areas where pest activity is present. The number of visits may vary from site to site and is dependent on the needs of the site and the particular management plan developed. At times, no particular treatment may be applied at the time of a visit but the site would still be monitored and inspected.

Easily neglected but just as critical to the success of an IPM approach is the evaluation and modification of the management plan. IPM is not stagnant but requires evaluation and adjustment along the way. This approach is conducive to long term lawn management. Certain sites will require little modification while others will require considerable change, especially as problem sites begin to respond to proper management. In these problem situations, inputs actually tend to decrease with time when an IPM approach is followed.

At each step of the IPM process communication is critical. IPM is information based rather than product based. Communication with the owner or property manager makes or breaks the success of an IPM program. The inspection, the management plan, the monitoring and treatment visits and the subsequent evaluation of the program should all be approached as a form of customer communication. The client should be able to develop a realistic expectation of the site and a knowledge of the inherent problems associated with the site using the information provided.

Communication also becomes critical with the technician that conducts the site visits and treatments. If possible, the technician should be involved at all stages of the IPM process. Obviously, good verbal and written communication skills are a prerequisite to a quality technician. A level of knowledge above the industry norm is desirable, but this is more easily trained than communication skills and attitude.

Equipment needs for an IPM approach may be different from equipment used for a more traditional approach. Since each site varies, flexibility is important in terms of application. This may require carrying multiple fertilizer and pest control products. Pesticide amounts are typically smaller so vehicle down sizing is common with an IPM operation. Spray systems that inject materials at the gun or allow small quantity mixing on the vehicle are well suited to an IPM operation.

MARKETING IPM FOR LAWN CARE

The belief in IPM as a philosophy is also critical to the marketing of an IPM approach. A mistake often made is to offer a traditional lawn care option and an IPM option. IPM is at a disadvantage simply due to an experience factor - sales staff, clients and technicians are much more familiar with the traditional approach and IPM will be shuffled aside because it's "too confusing," "too expensive," or "too difficult" to implement. Rather it is better to implement certain principles of IPM in the process of gradual transition away from a traditional approach to a certain level of IPM. Practices such as targeting pesticides, offering additional management services, soil testing to determine fertilizer recommendations and development of fact sheets on cultural practices and pest problems are all simple ways to ease into IPM. A close look at your current operation may already reveal many IPM principles as work.

Marketing IPM is also about marketing professionalism. Since IPM is information based rather than product based, it is important to feel comfortable selling service which is what most professionals sell. Our industry has always talked about service but we did not make any money unless we sold a product in the form of an application. We must change this attitude.

Your doctor, your dentist, your lawyer all charge you for their expertise. Critics argue that the expertise of these professions is greater than someone in lawn care. But your plumber, your electrician, your auto mechanic, the person that fixes or maintains your home appliances also charge for their expertise. Surely we are on a par with this group. "The consumer won't tolerate a charge for our expertise" is an argument often made. That's only because as a profession we don't charge them. Try finding a repairman for your washer that you can talk out of his service charge. It is an industry standard that we as consumers have come to expect.

With an IPM approach, not treating is a very viable option in certain cases. What makes it viable in these certain cases is that it is also a very good option agronomically or environmentally. Unless we charge for our ability to make this type of management decision, we cannot operate with an IPM approach profitably.

Fees also are important to cover what may be more time spent during the initial inspection and the development of the management plan. Time is critical at these stages since we are gathering information and making recommendations that will decide the success of the lawn care program for that particular site. Short cuts at these stages jeopardize the end results and ultimately the quality of the lawn.

Perhaps the best marketing tool for IPM is the concept of IPM itself. This concept involves a lot of common sense. When compared to a traditional lawn care approach of blanket applications of pesticides and fertilization based on guesswork, most consumers would wonder why a traditional approach still exists. It makes sense to apply pesticides only where needed, to evaluate the lawn for proper mowing and watering, to apply fertilizer based on the requirements of the grass species and levels of nutrients in the soil and to manage the lawn for long term health and vigor. IPM can do all of this. IPM is proper turfgrass management.

Money well spent is also a powerful inducement to a consumer. IPM eliminates unnecessary treatments and manages the lawn as a unique entity and not just as another stop in a tanker truck's route. Service is personalized and the needs of the consumer are met.

Finally, the environmental issues provide an opportunity for marketing an IPM approach. Unfortunately these same issues are also subject to abuse and confusion on the part of our industry if not handled in an honest and professional manner. IPM does not eliminate pesticides. What IPM does accomplish is lawn care using the best available management practices. Pesticides are not the focus of this approach but are one of many valuable management tools available for use by a professional when deciding a course of action for the particular lawn. IPM meets the environmental concerns of the consumer. As critical, IPM meets the needs of government and may help change the overall public perception of lawn care.

To properly market IPM, it is first necessary to believe in the philosophy of IPM. Begin to implement IPM principles as a transition away from a traditional lawn care approach. Secondly, we must believe in ourselves as professionals and be willing to charge for our expertise. There are hundreds of reasons not to charge, none of which is good.

Once we change our own minds, it now becomes time to change the minds of consumers. IPM is common sense that a consumer can conceptualize. IPM is proper turf management. IPM is money well spent. And IPM meets the environmental concerns of the consumer.

IPM represents the future of our profession. The writing is on the wall. Our traditional approach to lawn care is the dinosaur in the process of extinction. IPM principles put the control back into our hands as an industry. This control is not only control of lawn care practices but control of the decisions that affect our livelihoods. IPM represents self regulation which is the best type of regulation of any profession.