COMMON SENSE
WEED CONTROL

Is it possible we chemical applicators are caught in our own web of “weed-free” marketing jargon and quick-fix chemicals? Come on, industry, let’s get real.

by Phil Christian III

Controlling weeds in ornamental turf has emerged as one of the most difficult and perhaps most important issues we will face in the 1990s.

According to 1989 surveys, weeds—a natural part of the landscape—continue to be the single biggest source of customer dissatisfaction with lawn care companies. This is caused, in part, by an industry afflicted with unrealistic customer expectations on the amount of weeds acceptable in lawns.

Weeds that distract from the landscape’s general appearance are considered symptoms of poor management. But a weed infestation that would threaten the actual health or vigor of the turf would far exceed any visual limits. Therefore, the real issue in weed control is how weeds affect the landscape’s visual quality.

If we are going to talk about visual quality, we must set some criteria for how the landscape is viewed. The Mona Lisa, for example, is not very attractive when viewed under a magnifying glass. Step back a few feet within the visual range intended by the artist and it becomes a beautiful work of art.

The landscape, too, should be viewed first from a distance. “Curb appeal” should be judged by walking, standing or driving a few feet from the curb.

On balance
Part of being in control of the landscape is keeping its various elements in relative balance. This means we must accept the existence of weeds as part of the system.

Weeds that detract from the general health and appearance or balance of the landscape are not acceptable. It is also true that some weeds are more acceptable than others. Some varieties of clover, for example, are the same color as turfgrass and grow at a similar rate. If the turf is correctly mowed on schedule, small amounts of clover will not detract from the color or texture of the lawn.

But what about the owner who says, “Don’t talk to me about balance or offensive weeds versus non-offensive weeds. You promised weed-free, and that is what I want.”

This same customer has been conditioned over the years by the lawn care industry’s marketing efforts to think “weed-free.” Why? Because companies are agreeing to perform no-charge service calls when customers see a few weeds. The customer who has shopped around in the industry may have heard a variety of unrealistic claims or promises made by lawn care operators. They have selected you to perform the services on their grass, and they expect your company to live up to all the promises they have heard.

Your only defense against unrealistic demands and expectations is to tell the customer the truth: there is no such thing as “weed-free.” A company promises to control weeds to the extent that they will not distract from the appearance of a property when viewed from the curb. The one condition to the promise is that the customer and the landscape manager work with the company and follow its instructions to better manage the landscape for acceptable weed control.

You are in this together. We have trained the customer to believe our magic chemicals can provide a “quick fix” for weeds any time we choose to apply it. The truth is, there are numerous limitations to the application of chemicals. At some point, excess application could do damage to the turf.

Weed control should be viewed as a landscape management issue. Weed control chemicals are used as a supplement to that management program, but they do have limitations.

Do customers understand exactly what their role is in managing weed control? Have they been told, for example, a spring pre-emergent has been applied and should be watered in, and they should avoid mowing for 24 hours, since incorrect mowing practices, hand raking and de-thatching can reduce the effectiveness of the weed control program?

How many times have we made a professional herbicide application continued on page 42
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only to have some action taken by the customer (either before or after the application) negate its effect?

For instance, on Friday afternoon at 1 o'clock, you make a post-emergence herbicide application to a fescue lawn which had not received a pre-emergent in round one. The application was textbook, with 100 percent coverage, perfect timing and perfect weather for maximum results. By 1:15, you are leaving the customer's property congratulating yourself on a "Pride-of-the-Industry" application. At 1:30, the automatic irrigation system (which was supposed to be turned off) comes on, drenching the turf for the next two hours. Total saturation and run-off occurs 30 minutes into the cycle.

At 3:30, the high school student next door shows up on his father's new riding mower with the patented "Whirller-Sucker-Vacuum-Catcher" apparatus, and scalps the fence down to 1½ inches. The whirling, dull blades, turning at different speeds, chop the turf into chunks while the apparatus strips the soil surface of all organic matter not tied down by a mature root system.

What is the customer most likely to complain about in the coming weeks? You guessed it: weed problems.

What is your response? Perhaps this is the time to implement your new, get-tough, tell-it-like-it-is policy.

Our responsibilities

You might politely tell the customer you know what happened to the lawn after your Friday afternoon "State-of-the-Art" professional post-emergent application. You might also tell the customer that your unconditional weed-free warranty has been voided, and a re-spray will be an additional charge. The customer will most likely respond by saying, "We appreciate your straight talk, and we don't deny that watering and mowing shortly after your application may have had a negative effect on your weed control program. But look at the issue from our point of view. We sell. If we allow the existence of weeds, we must have an uphill battle. Our customers simply do not know whether they are being well-served until they get or do not get what they were promised.

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