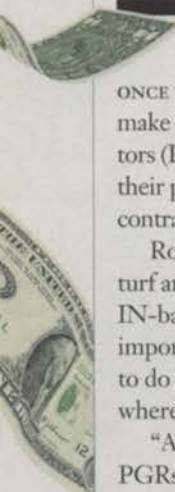




MAKING PGRs PROFITABLE

Plant growth regulators are engineered to help contractors save labor and fuel. **BY CURT HARLER**



ONCE LANDSCAPERS REALIZE they can make a buck using plant growth regulators (PGRs), they will make them part of their programs. But the problem is many contractors don't understand PGRs.

Roger Storey, vice president of the turf and ornamental unit at Carmel, IN-based SePRO, stresses that it's important to see the value. "If you want to do more with the same crew, that's where PGRs can help," he says.

"A lot of landscapers are afraid of PGRs because they don't feel they have adequate knowledge about using them," says Laylah VanBibber, director of marketing at PBI Gordon, Kansas

City, MO. Many more landscapers use PGRs for ornamental treatments than for mowing, she says.

PBI Gordon finished a study of 584 landscapers early in December and found that just 7.1% use PGRs for mowing, most citing the cost of the product and uncertainty about use.

About two-thirds of those responding charge for their services on a per-mow basis. It's tough for them to justify a higher cost service to the customer when the customer sees fewer mowings.

But industry sources say, and studies show, that PGRs can more than pay for themselves with labor and fuel savings on the turf maintenance side as well.

Stay manicured longer

Contract mowers have an easier time justifying PGRs. It's simple to cost-justify PGRs on hard-to-mow or dangerous areas. Steep hillsides or ditch banks are perfect for PGR use. The seedhead-suppression is good, too, especially on larger, more remote turf areas.

"Without raggedy seedheads sticking up, a far-away area will look trim for a longer time without additional mowing," VanBibber says.

Another key market is cemeteries or other places with a lot of trimming required. "PGRs are a great tool to spray around headstones to reduce trimming," says Dennis Shepard, Ph.D., a technical representative for Syngenta Professional Products.

Labor, equipment costs and clipping removal figure large in the PBI Gordon study. Travel to the job site does not.

Interestingly, 48% of contractors bag clippings. Reducing the number of clippings to remove is another place PGRs cut costs.

Twice as nice

Perhaps the newest product on the market is Legacy, a combination of Primo (trifluralin-ethyl + flurprimidol) and Cutless (flurprimidol). SePRO introduced it last May. Legacy is labeled for golf courses (not landscape use), although Storey says the company expects to expand the label.

Legacy acts two ways on the plant cycle, one early and one late. The result, research says, is enhanced suppression, better color and about a week's extra activity. In addition, Storey says the "rebound" effect noted with Primo alone is eliminated. Cutless works on the roots, Primo on the leaf.

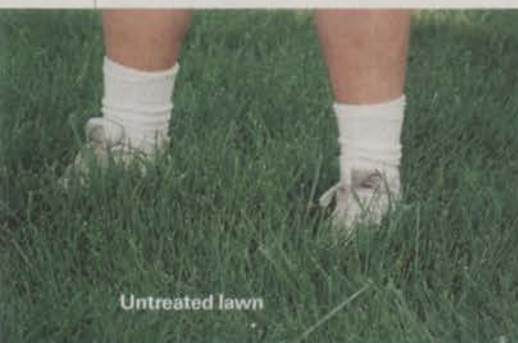
Because PGRs slow down turf growth, lawn pros can realize significant savings in fuel costs, labor reduction and/or reallocation for other tasks. Plus, their mowing equipment will work more efficiently and last longer, says Shepard, adding that PGRs make even more economic sense where the lawn care pro has contracted for the mowing and landscape maintenance operation.

PGRs also can help lawn maintenance companies expand their customer bases. Cool-season turf species like tall fescue and Kentucky bluegrass grow very fast in the spring, and it is a challenge to keep up with the mowing. PGRs can be used to manage the growth during the spring, and turf growth will slow as the temperatures warm.

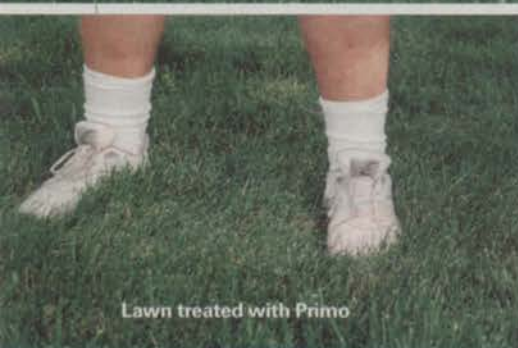
"In the North, one or two applications will greatly reduce unsightly Poa annua seedheads in the spring," says Don Myers, product development manager for herbicides and PGRs with Bayer Environmental Science.

While Bayer's Proxy is known in turf-grass for seedhead suppression, the company has another product in the wings for use on trees and hedges. It has been registered by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, but has not yet been

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Untreated lawn



Lawn treated with Primo



MAKING PGRs PROFITABLE

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released. While it first will be targeted at the nursery business, the material likely will see use in the T&O area.

"I think it could be of value in a landscaping situation," Myers says. "If you didn't have to prune hedges and could get a more restrictive growth pattern with less labor, it would be worth considering."

Success in the South

Southern landscapers do a lot of ornamental trim work — sometimes twice a month. A PGR can cut the number of trips for a Southeastern landscaper by 30% to 50%, says Storey.

"Think of what you save in terms of labor, travel, fuel costs and new

Protecting our PGR tools

All eyes in the landscaping world continue to be on Ontario, Canada, where herbicide and pesticide use on landscapes has been severely curtailed.

"Ontario will have ratty lawns with dandelions," notes Bayer's Don Myers. "Will that be acceptable? If the public will not tolerate that look, then we will get push-back."

Perhaps of greater concern is the use of generic products, including plant growth regulators (PGRs).

"This is a great challenge for manufacturers," Myers says. "Short-term, landscapers will be happy with cheaper product — if it performs equally. In many cases, however, it will not."

Pests become resistant to older materials, he points out, plus "when you hamper the profits of basic manufacturers, you will have a negative effect on new chemical development." — C.H.



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opportunity to do other business," Storey says.

"Most LCOs want to slow turf growth to reduce mowing and clippings," says Shepard, noting several areas of the U.S. have limits on "green waste" going to landfills.

But because PGRs can be especially sensitive to the weather, geography and timing of application, some applicators simply are better at the art than others. How does one join the elite group?

Knowing the material's mode of action is one key to success. "It is important to know whether the PGR is taken up by the foliage or the roots," Shepard says.

PGR use in lawn care is not an area covered heavily in most states' license programs. "Go to the manufacturer," VanBibber recommends. "Co-workers in the industry are also good resources," Shepard adds.

"It's a good time for landscapers to try PRs as they need to cut labor and fuel expenses," VanBibber concludes. LHM

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