

His solutions are all wet



Winner of the Florida Turfgrass Association's highest award in 1989, Tom Latta built a business on controlling a pair of exotic aquatic weeds

By
Kit Bradshaw

Meeting Dr. Tom Latta is like meeting every kid's best high school science teacher. The teacher who was so contagiously enthusiastic about frogs that you actually wanted to dissect one just to learn more. The one who honed your creative problem-solving skills by helping you try again after your chemical reaction experiment foamed all over the Bunsen burner.

Latta, the president of Deerfield Beach-based AmerAquatic Corporation and winner of the Florida Turfgrass Association's 1989 Wreath of Grass, attributes his success to "attention to detail, well-trained people, quality and service."

AmerAquatic is one of a handful of companies that specializes in lake management, particularly the control of algae and aquatic weeds, for a growing list of private customers: golf courses, homeowner associations and developers.

A Ph.D. in physical chemistry who can explain the properties of aquatic weeds with enthusiasm, Latta is a natural problem solver who encourages inventiveness.

Take the matter of equipment

"Most of our equipment results from seeing a problem — 'we could be more efficient if we do this' — and encouraging our employees to generate ideas to solve the problem," Latta says. "We have a well-equipped fabrication plant where we can build something that helps solve a problem."

For instance, lake banks — as every superintendent knows — are not necessarily even, flat surfaces. So AmerAquatic grafted about a thousand pounds of equip-

ment onto a Volkswagen chassis and came up with the Spra-Buggy, a vehicle that can safely traverse 35-degree inclines.

The company also builds its own spray boats with special lightweight materials from Sweden, resulting in 300-pound craft that are highly maneuverable.

The purpose of all this inventiveness is the control of algae and two weeds: hydrilla and water hyacinth.

"The state of Florida spends \$10 million to \$12 million a year trying to control aquatic weeds. . . and that's just on herbicides," says Latta. "It also spends a lot of money on manpower and mechanical harvesting of these weeds.

"Hydrilla gets most of that money; hyacinth gets the rest. The so-called minor weeds don't get that much attention at all."

Hydrilla is anchored at the bottom of a waterway and grows toward light; it chokes the water system.

Water hyacinth grows on top; it smothers the waterway.

It's rare when both weeds co-exist as they do at Lake Okeechobee.

Together these weeds can create a one-two punch in any canal or body of water. Both are native to South America and lack natural predators here.

"Hydrilla was imported to Florida in the 1950s," Latta explains. "Someone in Dade County used it as an aquarium plant. When they got rid of the aquarium, they dumped the contents into a canal. . . It's a national menace now. You can see it growing in the Tidal Basin in Washington, D.C."

Water hyacinth came to New Orleans during the World's Fair in the 1890s.



"A world traveler thought it would be a good plant to grace the bayous during the fair," Latta said. "Admittedly, the plant does have a very attractive purple flower. But after the fair, the hyacinths were left unattended, started to swell and spread through the bayous.

"Someone else imported it to Jacksonville and the same thing happened in the St. John's River."

AmerAquatic technicians use chemical, mechanical and biological weapons to control algae and the weeds.

"Our technicians are very accurate marksmen," Latta says. "When they are trimming the weeds around a lake, they will create a very straight line so they won't have a herbicide drift going up and burning the turf.

"Of course the superintendent is worried because he wants to get his turf right down to the lake. If he gets a herbicide burn, he'll have erosion problems and it looks unsightly."

In the back of AmerAquatic's sprawling facility in Deerfield Beach — one of five locations in Florida — are a trio of fish tanks.

The tanks hold hundreds of white amur, a relative of the carp imported from China, which feeds on aquatic weeds. They are fattened on grass clippings before being released.

"The bigger they are, the less vulnerable they are to predators," (egrets, herons and bass) Latta says.

Part of the problem is that development is encroaching on nature. . . We need to structure ourselves to protect wetlands, create wetlands or create areas which will function as wetlands.

"One of our lakes has a problem with water condensation from air conditioning," says Steve Kuhn, superintendent at Doral Resort & CC in Miami. "AmerAquatic put in the weed-eating amur and it has solved all our problems."

Latta admits that 25 years ago, he wouldn't have thought he ever would be standing beside a fish tank, trying to capture an elusive white amur for the camera.

"I was in New Jersey, working for a chemical company," he says.

Already armed with an undergraduate degree from Princeton and a Ph.D. from the University of Illinois, Latta attended night school at New York University to earn an MBA.

His unique combination of scientific and business skills led him into management consulting.

"We got involved with companies that had invested in small businesses that supported the moon shot," Latta recalls. "When the moon program was

over, there was a question as to these companies' viability. I was brought in to analyze these companies."

After six years as a consultant, Latta joined a client as vice president for corporate development. Among the client's assets was a company involved with wastewater purification and one of its subsidiaries was a company known as Florida Aquatic.

"At that time I was approaching 40 and I wanted to own my own business, or a piece of my business — many of our key employees are also shareholders in this company. I bought shares from a retiring stockholder and the company continued to grow.

"When we expanded beyond Florida, we changed the name from Florida Aquatic to AmerAquatic."

Latta emphasizes that AmerAquatic isn't in the business of killing weeds; just controlling them. The firm also is involved in wetlands mitigation — providing areas in which weeds are encouraged to grow.

"Part of the problem, as seen by some regulatory people, by some water managers and many environmentalists, is that development is encroaching on nature... and we have to pay for this. We need to structure ourselves to protect wetlands, create wetlands or create areas which will function as wetlands.

"In some cases, this means we create an area around a lake, plant aquatic plants there and encourage and maintain this as a border zone which will function as wetlands."

Environmental regulation is of primary concern to Latta, who heads the FTGA's external affairs committee, which focuses on legislative affairs.

"We lobby . . . perhaps that's too strong a word . . . but we share our views on legislation that affects our industry," he says.

THOMAS LATTA, PH. D.

Age: 51

Experience: M.W Kellogg, New Jersey, researcher; CRESAP, New York, management consultant; CLEPAK, New York, vice president of corporate development; AmerAquatic (formerly Florida Aquatic), president since 1978.

Education: B.S. in chemistry, Princeton University; Master's and Ph. D., University of Illinois. MBA, New York University.

Professional: Director FTGA 1979-1986 (president 1984-85); current chairman of external affairs committee.

Personal: Married to Carla; two sons, Bruce 25 and Brian 24.

Latta was a board member of the FTGA from 1979 through 1986, serving as president in 1984-885.

"Dr. Latta is a man I truly respect," says Jim Ellison, superintendent at Bay Hill Club in Orlando. "He has made great contributions to the FTGA. Our industry really needs people of his stature."

Latta says an important function of the FTGA is to keep its members informed.

"For instance, there is SERA Title III (See page 48), which is called the 'com-

munity-right-to-know law.' It was created in response to the Union Carbide explosion and is designed to let a community know where large quantities of hazardous chemicals are stored.

"The federal government administers this law through the states.

"On a golf course, there are three chemicals which could trigger compliance with SERA provisions: Paraquat, Namacur and chlorine.

"The issue is not *what* a chemical is, but *how much* you have.

"If you have a tank of chlorine that is over the quantity threshold, you are required to post notification, which can be very expensive for a golf course, both in following the provisions and in the penalties that can occur if the regulations are not followed."

Other association activities which Latta feels are important for the long pull include taking the lead in developing a research program on groundwater quality.

"This is one of the up-and-coming issues," he says. "What *really* happens to the pesticides, to the fertilizers you are putting on golf courses and home lawns?"

"It is easy to accuse us of polluting the environment when you don't have any facts. Our goal is to try and get some studies done to address the issues instead of speculation. . . to substitute facts for speculation in rule-making and legislation.

Several years ago, he adds, the FTGA approached Florida's Department of Environmental Regulation to add some turf sites to its groundwater monitoring program proposed for Palm Beach County.

"I asked for volunteers and we got an instant response from two intensely maintained golf courses. As high-budget, high-maintenance courses, they present a worst-case scenario. If we don't find a problem in the monitoring wells there, it would be a pretty good basis for extrapolating that there won't be a problem with a low-budget, low-maintenance golf course."

Latta sees the FTGA as unique in its role to inform and educate.

"You know, we in the turf management business are basically farming in an urban environment. We are surrounded by homes, condominiums, water supplies, municipal well water systems.

"If we are good stewards of the land, and I think we are, not only must we be good stewards, we must also have the data that *say* we are good stewards.

"That is why the research and education efforts of the FTGA are so important."

Kit Bradshaw is a freelance writer based in the West Palm Beach area.

Wreath of Grass Recipients

1960

James L. Blackledge
Gene C. Nutter
O. S. Baker

1961

Joseph R. Konwinski
Lloyd M. Clifton
T.A. Johnson
William L. Barton
L. N. Clark
Ralph F. Jones

1962

Sidney Kirkpatrick
John Schabinger
Henry C. Martin
James E. Ousley
Ed B. Cale

1963

Frank Ward
Howard Bardsley
David W. Turner
Ralph W. White

1964

Ralph Harper
Ward Wood
Nash Higgins

1965

Chan W. Baker
Ralph Smalley

1966

Roy Bair
Wayne A. Hibbs

1967

Harvey Linderman
Robert A. Lagesse

1968

Robert Willis
Charlie Johnson

1969

Francis Brannan
E.O. Burt

1970

G.C. Horn
Ben Reemelin

1971

William E. Colburn
Arthur Griffes

1972

Joseph Yuzzi
Wynfred R. Briggs

1973

J. Leroy Fortner
Robert H. Enochs

1974

John S. Hutton

1975

Stanley F. Cruse

1976

Carl R. "Bud" Pearson
Charles L. "Bud" Quandt

1977

Harvey Phillips

1978

Harry G. Meyers

1979

Robert B. Sanderson

1980

David L. DeBra

1981

Brian M. Silva

1982

Max A. Brown

1983

William G. Wagner

1984

Jerry H. Cheesman

1985

T.E. Freeman

1987

Dan Jones

1988

Gerald Millholen

1989

Tom Latta