

Learning Curve

Manufacturers say superintendents need to be better educated about slow-release fertilizer



You thought (and still do) that programming your VCR was puzzling. That is, until you tried to understand how slow-release fertilizer works.

Show Jeff Higgins a superintendent who can explain the functions of slow-release fertilizer clearly, and Higgins will show you someone who can solve a Rubik's Cube in a minute. Higgins, director of market development for Pursell Technologies in Sylacauga, Ala., says perplexity reigns in the world of slow-release fertilizer.

"Superintendents are confused," he says. "There are also a lot of so-called experts, including Ph.D.s, who misunderstand slow-release fertilizer."

Higgins, a Ph.D. himself, was a turf specialist at Auburn University before coming to Pursell. He says most universities aren't teaching future superintendents about the basic functions of slow-release fertilizer.

Others agree that education needs to be addressed. One company executive, who asked to be unnamed, questioned whether some manufacturers' own salespeople can present adequate sales pitches about their products and how they compare to the competition's goods. It's not that the slow-release technology is new. "What we have now isn't a lot different than what we had back in the '50s," says Higgins, whose company offers superintendents educational courses on fertilizer technology.

But the technology has only come of age in the past 15 years, especially in the golf course maintenance industry, stresses Bill Stringfellow, director of product development and management for Rocky River, Ohio-based Lesco.

Higgins and Stringfellow note that there are only a handful of slow-release technologies. Higgins says slow-release nitrogen sources fall into two groups distinguished by their manufacturing processes — urea-reaction fertilizers and coated fertilizers.

The problem for superintendents — and the source of their confusion — is the profusion of products created from the technologies. "Some of the slow-release products are just adaptations of other products," Stringfellow says.

The way the "new" products are presented doesn't help matters. "Everybody has to add their own marketing flair to say their stuff is better than your stuff," Higgins says.

Gary Neyman, product manager of the golf course division for Lebanon Turf Products in Butler, Pa., says consolidation

of companies that manufacture slow-release fertilizer will decrease the number of products. "In many cases, good business practices will dictate what stays and what doesn't," he says.

Despite their confusion, superintendents are keenly interested in nitrogen issues. They know proper management of nitrogen plays an important role in their careers. "Nitrogen has become increasingly important in agronomic performance and what superintendents are trying to achieve with playability," says Alan Nees, vice president of turf and ornamental sales for Mequon, Wis.-based Agrotain International.

Superintendents are asking several questions about slow-release fertilizer, including:

- When should I apply it to get the best performance?
- How much do I need to water it, and should I water it in?
- How does the fertilizer break down and how long does it take?
- What kind of fertilizer should I use in my region?

Superintendents are also asking about cost. Don Johnson, manager of professional products from Simplot Turf and Horticulture, says they're more concerned about economics, not just agronomic performance.

"They're looking at the whole package," Johnson says. "They're asking themselves if they're getting the product performance they want over a certain time."

But when it comes to price, superintendents shouldn't only consider the cost per bag or ton of fertilizer, manufacturers say. The real economics of the product have to do with use efficiencies, Higgins stresses. "What's significant is cost per day of nitrogen," Stringfellow adds.

While Higgins says no new slow-release fertilizer technology currently exists, manufacturers continue to improve and tweak current products for better performance. Bill Davis, sales manager for Tyler Enterprises of Elwood in Libertyville, Ill., says manufacturers continue to address regionality issues. "It's difficult to make one fertilizer for the entire United States," he adds.

As with products in other industries, there are keys for success. Thomas Handel, vice president and general manager of the professional turf products division for The Andersons Technologies in Maumee, Ohio, says the company discovered superintendents value excellent customer service. In market research, The Andersons learned that superintendents want performance, value, availability, ease of use and service.

Of course, no one can forget education. "We all have to be constantly looking to evolve," Nees says. ■