

Extra-Value Meals

Combination fertilizer products provide superintendents the opportunity to do two jobs for the price of one.

But companies aren't marketing them aggressively.

What gives?

By Frank H. Andorka Jr.
Managing Editor

Don Johnson loves combination fertilizer products. The vice president and general manager of professional products for J.R. Simplot says they're a great bargain for superintendents because using a granular fertilizer that also includes a pesticide saves superintendents time and money.

"The labor savings on these products is enormous," Johnson says. "Some of the new control chemicals work even more efficiently in granular than in spray form. They give superintendents more bang for their bucks."

Yet manufacturers report that sales of combination products have remained flat after growing significantly shortly after they were introduced more than 25 years ago. They point to a variety of factors, including the natural cautiousness of superintendents about trying new products, the limited number of control products currently offered as part of a fertilizer package and cost.

But one manufacturer says the profit margins on combination products aren't high enough for some companies, so they're not promoting them as alternatives to a traditional two-step chem-



ical application program. So though these products have emerged as a solid segment of the chemical market, manufacturers expect sales to remain stable instead of continuing to grow at a fast pace — unless companies can find ways to make combination products more profitable.

Saving time and money

Two issues typically spur superintendents to use combination products, according to Steve Jedrzejek, senior product manager for combination and control products for LESCO. One is the convenience of putting down two applications at the same time, which saves time and money in times of tight budgets.

The other is the concern some superintendents have about potential pesticide drift for spray applications. Some superintendents are concerned about public perception when it comes to spraying. As Johnson says, "When people see a spreader, they don't panic because they've spread fertilizer on their own lawns. When they see a sprayer, sometimes they do panic, even when what's being sprayed is perfectly safe."

Jedrzejek says granular combination products help alleviate some of those concerns. In addition, it's easier for superintendents to use granular control products instead of sprays in some states because there are fewer product-use restrictions.

Combination products also offer superintendents a significant cost savings in some cases, depending on the quality of fertilizer and control products, says Mike Bandy, marketing manager of turf products for The Andersons. Quantitatively, the savings would be at least \$5 per 50-pound bag for a fairway/rough product, but it could easily be \$15 per bag or more for a greens/tees product, he says.

"You also can't forget the savings in labor," Bandy says. "By making one application instead of two, you're allowing the crew members to do other equally important jobs. Combination products allow superintendents to use their labor more efficiently."

It's also easier to apply a pesticide in

granular form when it's been added to a fertilizer than a spray, Bandy says. "It's less complicated, and with more superintendents using less-experienced employees, that's an advantage as well," Bandy says.

Finally, Johnson says the cost of combination products, though sometimes more expensive than either fertilizers or

pesticides alone, are usually cheaper than purchasing the two products separately.

Not for everyone

Jedrzejek says combination products aren't for everyone, however. He says they are only workable if the schedules for fertilizers and control products are in sync.

Continued on page 70



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Extra-Value Meals

Continued from page 69

"There's more flexibility with a spray," Jedrzejek says. "When you use combination products, you must apply both products at the same time."

Gary Neyman, sports turf manager for Lebanon Turf Products, says another potential drawback for combination products is that not all control products are suitable for combined use.

"Some materials don't lend themselves easily to combination formulations because the fertility requirements and tim-

ing might not mesh with the need to control a particular pest or problem," Neyman says. "In some ways, that limits the pests superintendents can control with these products."

Traditionally, the control products most often combined with fertilizers are pre-emergent herbicides because the application schedules often coincide, Neyman says. Jedrzejek says

about 70 percent of the combination products sold by LESCO are fertilizers with pre-emergent herbicides. There are also combination products with fungicides and insecticides, but those are less common. Jedrzejek says 25 percent of the LESCO combination product sales are insecticides, and the final 5 percent of the market is made up of fungicides, wetting agents,

Measure Twice for Best Performance

According to Mike Bandy, marketing manager of turf products for The Andersons, there are two key components in making sure the combination product you buy will perform as expected.

One standard measurement to understand is the size guide number or SGN. It is defined as the average particle size of a granular product, expressed in millimeters, multiplied by 100. A product with an SGN of 240 has an "average" particle size of 240 millimeters. Bandy suggests superintendents use products with an SGN of 100 on greens, 125 on tees and surrounds, 150 on fairways and 215 on roughs.

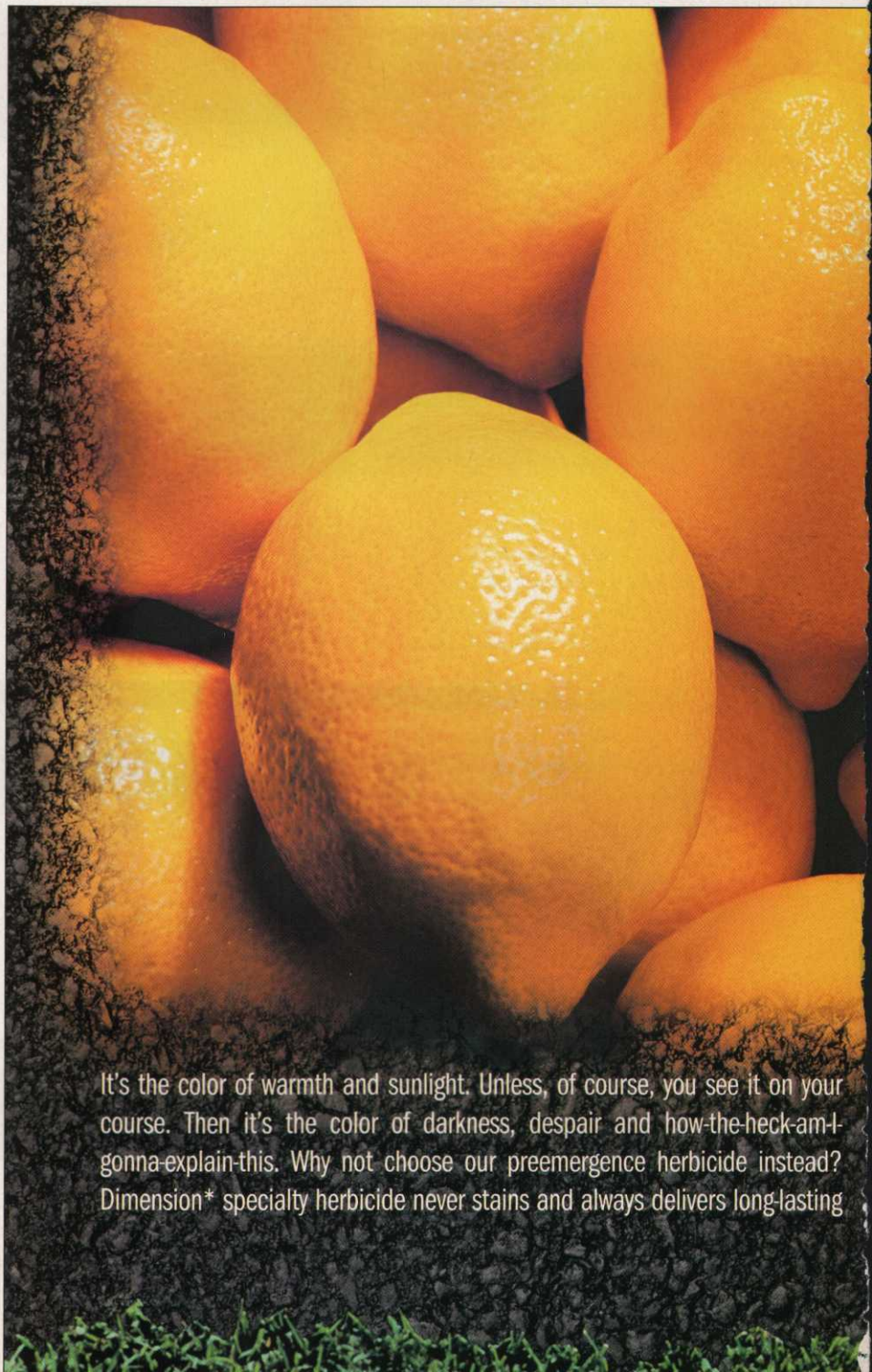
But Bandy says that average size is only half the story.

"A product that has every particle sized at SGN 240 is better than a product that has half the particles sized at SGN 120 and half at SGN 360, even though both products have an average SGN of 240," he adds.

Quantitatively, the second measure is referred to as Uniformity Index (UI). This calculation is more complicated than SGN because it uses statistics. Typically, the industry will refer to a product as being "good" or "not good" when referring to consistent sizing, Bandy says. "There are UI measurements that coincide with this, but they are not commonly used," he says.

Bandy recommends superintendents find out the UI of the product to ensure even coverage.

— Frank H. Andorka Jr.,
Managing Editor



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Bandy says the mode of action also determines whether a combination product will be effective, and that's what limits the number of fungicides that can be combined. Many fungicides rely on foliar uptake and are designed to release on contact with the leaves, while granular fertilizers have to be watered in to

be taken up by the roots. In addition, there are some fungal diseases that can be aggravated by turf growth, so applying a fungicide combined with certain fertilizers may aggravate the problem instead of helping it.

"Fungicides are the most difficult chemicals to combine," Bandy says. "If they're not going to work, we're not going to produce them."



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Why market growth has stagnated

Neyman says one of the reasons the combination product market hasn't exploded the way some people thought it would in the last five years is that superintendents have concerns about the products' efficacy.

"When I talk to superintendents, I get questions that suggest they worry about whether a combination product will work as effectively as separate applications of fertilizers and pesticides," Neyman says. "Superintendents, by nature, are cautious about trying something new if the traditional ways are working well enough."

Neyman also says there's a reluctance on the part of superintendents to apply pesticides wall-to-wall, which is the delivery method most common if it's com-

**Companies are reluctant
to market combination
products because the
profit margins are small.**

ined with fertilizers. "It doesn't fit in well with the integrated pest management philosophy of treating specific areas rather than using broadcast pesticides," he adds.

But there's another market factor at work as well. Simplot's Johnson says companies are reluctant to market these products aggressively to superintendents because the profit margins are so small.

"The margins on combination products are extremely low, which is one of the reasons they're such a good deal for superintendents," Johnson says. "Many times the fertilizer part of the combination is practically free."

The other challenge for manufacturers is the changing regulations that govern how combination products are registered, Johnson says. Under previous rules, companies only had to register the pesticide component to stay in compliance with states' environmental regula-

Continued on page 72

Extra-Value Meals

Continued from page 71

tions. Now, more states are requiring that both components be registered, he adds.

"I heard the president say in his State of the Union speech [in January] that he's against double taxation," Johnson says. "For chemical companies in the golf market, it's the double registration that's hurting us."

The key to making combination products more profitable will be adding extra value to them, he says. That could include strategies like improving the fertilizer component to the point where superintendents decide it's a "must have" to adding additional pesticides to the list of usable products in combination.

"Early on, we were all successful at selling the value of combination products, but that has dropped off some," Johnson says. "We've got to keep reaching for new opportunities and new selling strategies to keep the momentum going, and we will." ■

Factors to Consider When Choosing A Combination Product

If you decide to use a combination product, here are some ideas from the experts on what to consider:

- Decide what active ingredient makes the most sense for what you're trying to accomplish.
- Choose a company known for its quality of fertilizer because it's the delivery system for the pesticide in combination products.
- Ask the sales representative how the products are combined. (Some incorporate the active ingredient by adding a higher concentration of inert particles before blending with fertilizer. Others impregnate every particle with the active ingredient.)
- Select a company with known formulation expertise in the area of granular combination products because the quality of formulation is a factor in pesticide efficacy and ease of application.
- Pick a fertilizer that meets your needs (Note: That may *not* always be a nitrogen-based product, depending on subjects like soil type, turf variety and other seasonal factors.)
- Determine what particle size is appropriate for the job (smallest for greens, medium-sized for tees and fairways, and standard sized for roughs. See "How to Measure for Product Uniformity" on page 70 for details).
- Check to see how uniform the particles are throughout a product.
- Stick with products that have science to back up their claims of efficacy.
- Make sure the products won't interfere with the performance of other products used on the course.
- Use a good spreader that is properly calibrated within a given size guide number (SGN. See "How to Measure for Product Uniformity" for details).

— F.H.A. Jr.

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