

# CONTEMPLATING • Organics

By Ron Furlong,  
Contributing Editor

Superintendent is open to using more of such products — as long as he doesn't have to look over his shoulder

**W**hen I told my wife Nikki there were actually organic fungicides available to superintendents to use on the golf course, she couldn't understand how I ever even thought of using inorganics anymore. Nikki's gone green. It can be a bit of battle in the household sometimes.

"You're going to recycle that, right?"

"Ah . . . yes, of course. Never thought otherwise."

But her question about why aren't we all using organic pesticides, and or-

ganic fertilizers for that matter, deserves some thought. Why aren't we?

Well, I had my answer ready, which I didn't hesitate in rattling off to her, but it did make me reconsider that argument, and why we, as superintendents, have tended to make the inorganic argument without second thought.

Our argument is, of course, that conventional chemical-based pesticides work better than organics. Simple as that. This is what we believe. Is it

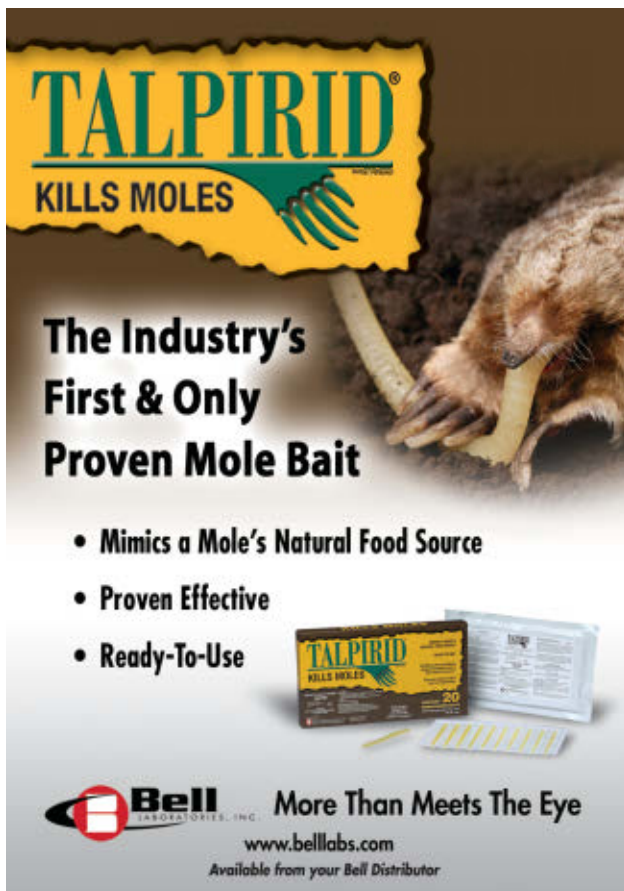
accurate? In most cases, it probably is. But in all cases? I'm not so sure.

There has been organic success in agriculture, but for some reason this hasn't trickled down much into turf-grass maintenance. But, as companies are bringing better organics to the playing field and developing more resistant grasses, do we need to reconsider this argument? Are there other reasons to start reconsidering it?

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Very few chemicals are used on courses such as Machrihanish Dunes in Scotland. But that's Scottish golf for you. Can American golfers handle the rugged look?

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## Contemplating Organics

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The main thing is this: Superintendents tend to use conventional chemicals for one reason, a reason they may not even be conscious of on many levels. They use them because of job security. Let the guy down the street be the guinea pig. I'm not going to risk my job on going green. And this fear, in most instances, is justified.

And it goes deeper than just the superintendent fearing if he lets his greens go to pot he'll be out the door. It courses through the main artery of the whole problem: expectations — from golfers, general managers, owners and green committees. It's all about perception of what golf courses should be in 2010.

Everyone must be willing to accept a different type of product, one that returns to the very roots of golf and the links courses that started it all on the rugged coasts of Scotland years ago. The only way superintendents will

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be comfortable embracing this bold new world is once they feel all these other entities (owners, general managers, etc.) have embraced it first. The superintendents can't be the ones leading us all down this path. Because if they try and nobody embraces, superintendents could lose their jobs. Who's going to volunteer for that?

It has to come from above. And in the cases where it has come from above, like the Mike Hurdzan-designed Widow's Walk Golf Course in Scituate, Mass., which calls itself America's first environmental demonstration course, the superintendent can comfortably fight this battle using organics, figuring out what works and what doesn't, and not be looking over his or her shoulder all the time.

Perception? Perception from above is the key.

When you see headlines like "America's 18,000 Golf Courses are Devastating the Environment" (actual headline from a 2004 article from organicconsumers.com) you know the path we're headed. It may not matter when we say we use chemicals responsibly and don't harm the environment, which is true. Common sense and even science don't always prevail.

It wouldn't take Nostradamus to tell us where golf course plant protection will be in 20 years. The writing is on the wall.

I mentioned companies developing better, more dis-



ease-resistant grasses for us in the future. This may be key in the future of turfgrass management. Just as important is the work that basic manufacturers have been doing in researching and developing reduced-risk pesticides that may be an area of some sort of compromise in the future.

As for myself, I'm hoping to give another organic a try this summer—maybe creating a test area on a nursery or practice green is the best way to ease into it. I've always been more behind the approach of letting the guy down the street be the guinea pig, but I think that needs to change. It starts with helping to educate golfers and the powers that be at our golf courses that things do, indeed, need to change. Weeds are a good place to start. For one, it's a lot easier to convince someone to live with some clover or chickweed in the fairways than it is some disease on the greens.

To my knowledge, although I haven't tried them myself, organic herbicides haven't been incredibly successful. Perhaps this is a good place to start with changing perception—allowing some weeds into the turfgrass. Or I should say, allowing someone to allow you to let some weeds into the turfgrass.

Organic is a word that has changed in recent years, in so much as the way we react when we hear it. Maybe I shouldn't speak for everyone. It has changed for me when I hear it. I used to roll my eyes at the word and even cringe a little. I'd avoid the organic vegetable section of the produce area in the grocery store like the plague. But I've softened. I buy organic food now, even veggies.

I've spread organic fertilizers a couple times a year and have even experimented with an organic fungicide. But I'm not in position to roll the dice and go 100-percent organic.

I'm still, like most superintendents, looking over my shoulder and

worrying too much about fusarium and anthracnose and how the greens are rolling. The perception around me hasn't changed.

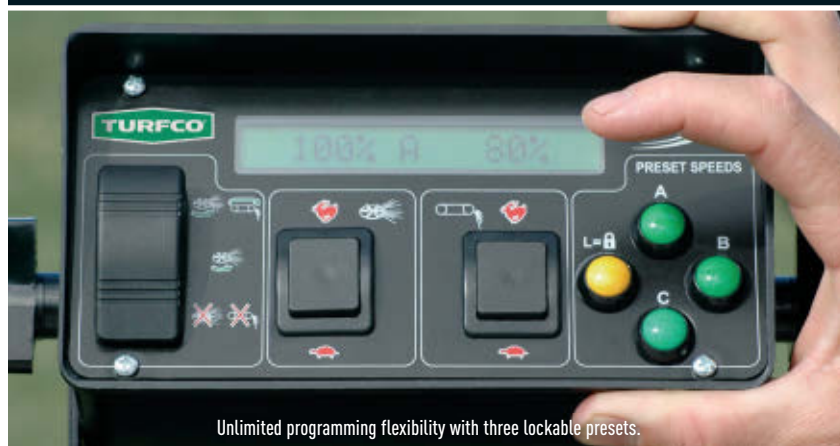
Am I now realizing this is part of my job? Yes. As an environmental steward, I must help change that perception.

So, next time I'm sitting on the couch with Nikki watching the Planet

Green Channel, and she turns to me and asks how I'm doing on the organic front at work, I'll smile and say, "It's coming along." ■

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