



Is It CHEAPER or BETTER?

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Throughout the winter the Great Lakes Green Section office receives a considerable amount of literature about new products and new management procedures. We also make it a point to visit exhibitors at numerous regional turf conferences and the GCSAA national convention. We are approached by salesman after salesman who have sometimes modest, but often unrealistic claims regarding the benefits of their products. Turf growth regulators, growth enhancers, plant hormones, insect pheromones, BT, XYZs—if we didn't know better, we would wonder how golf course superintendents ever managed to maintain high quality turf using only sound fertilization/irrigation management and sensible cultural practices.

Many sales representatives realize that the Green Section agronomists make Turf Advisory Service visits at well over 1,800 golf courses each season. From a marketing standpoint, "selling" an agronomist a new product may be more productive than "selling" to individual superintendents. As a group, the Green Section agronomists make a serious effort to keep abreast of new technology and products. However, one of the primary reasons superintendents utilize the Turf Advisory Service is that we strive to maintain an unbiased attitude. We generally suggest the tried and true turf management techniques and products, and only mention the use of relatively untested treatments on an experimental basis or as a last ditch effort when all else fails. It is undeniably a conservative attitude because recommendations made in our reports to subscribers are taken seriously. It should come as no surprise, then, that those who develop and invent new products often believe that the USGA doesn't give new products a fair shake.

The only claim to fame for some, but not all, new products are testimonials. Unfortunately, replicated scientific research data is often sought only after the products are being sold to golf course superintendents. Testimonials are easier to publish and much less expensive than funding research at a well respected university's Turfgrass Management Department. Yes, it's much more difficult deciphering data tables, least significant differences, and graphs than simply believing the testimonials of John Smith of Megabucks Country Club. But you can bet John didn't achieve his level of success by blindly following other superintendents' testimonials.

Be wary of demonstration plots and the results of field research that only represent one season of data. For example, abnormal weather patterns may produce misleading results. Any turf scientist worth his or her salt knows that the most reliable conclusions are drawn from data collected from varying locations over several years. Just as important is the concept of reproducibility. When other turf researchers cannot reproduce the results of a particular study using similar experimental techniques, we have a problem.

The problem is consistency. Many researchers are hesitant to endorse new products such as biostimulants, thatch reducers, soil conditioners, etc. because the results are inconsistent. Sometimes they work—hence the testimonials—and sometimes they don't. In contrast, an application of 1/2 lb. of urea to a putting green at Milwaukee Country Club will generally produce the same response as a similar application made to a green at Chicago Golf Club, or Hazeltine National, or Crooked Stick, and so on.

Let's assume that a new product produces consistent results. My next question is, "is it cheaper or better than that already being used on the golf course?" Why "fix" a sound maintenance program if it isn't broken? An example: a year or two ago several superintendents had success treating localized dry spots on collars of greens by coring with large diameter tines and then fill the holes with a porous sand substitute. Other superintendents had similar success by coring and then filling the holes with sand. You cannot deny that the new product helped relieve the problem. My argument is that sand produced similar results and is much cheaper than the widely publicized substitute.

Considering the recent advances in bio-engineering and other technology related to turf management, there will undoubtedly be and already are some very useful products on the market. Our task will be to separate the snake oils from the products that truly provide consistent beneficial effects. Look past the slick marketing blitz and demand unbiased scientific data instead of testimonials. Keep in mind that results from experiments made at several locations and by different researchers are much more reliable than the results from a single research station located a thousand miles from your golf course. Finally, if you're convinced that a product works, then ask the question: "is it cheaper or better than my current treatment?" Let's not stick our head in the sand regarding the potential benefits of new products, but demand accountability from the producers. In many ways, your job depends on it. 🍷

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