A CONSULTANT CAN PROVIDE TECHNOLOGY

By Arnold H. Webster

His view point is un-arguable: "You have to know what you're working with before you can treat it." With this attitude Dr. W. D. Thomas, researcher, forest pathologist and consulting arborist holds an amiable and steady hand on "Forest-Ag Environmental Protection Service," his consulting and research firm in Lafayette, California. Seldom does he diagnose without a confirming isolation in his laboratory. That's why a property-owning customer can be confident that the guess work is taken out of diagnoses Thomas makes.

Other professional arborists and pest control operators consult with him (400-500 samples per year are run through the lab) and are given a written report to take to clients. This "strictly business" professional attitude, backed by thorough investigation before diagnosis, is almost like insurance for clients. They can show their customers they are backed by a resource firm with laboratory facilities.

"When we run into questions we can't answer, we tell our client so," says Thomas with the disarming frankness you immediately feel is one of the reasons people have confidence in him. "We check the situation with whatever tools we need — light meter, moisture meter, Shigometer — and take samples to test in the lab. If all this makes us pretty sure we have something new to the area, we report that to our client."

Sometimes the "unknown" furnishes an excellent opportunity for testing new materials. Almost always the home owner is glad to cooperate in learning what treatment can be made. By using their trees as test trees, and observing nearby untreated trees as checks, Forest-Ag can have nearly laboratory conditions for research. This kind of work done "in the real world" is definitely the sort to inspire confidence in the home owner's mind.

Steady clients receive a newsletter that tells them of new items in research (they get a kick out of realizing they're in the know on new things) and what problems they might be looking for concerning trees, plants, lawns in the coming season. They also receive research releases reporting current results of research, and information leaflets describing pests being encountered locally.

With a wildlife biologist on the staff, coupled with associates in hydrology, engineering, geology, entomology, and remote sensing, Forest-Ag reaches far — from environmental studies for public agencies to assisting home owners to renovate their landscapes.

Tree appraisals are becoming more demanding each year as clients are encroached upon by growing population pressures. An increasing amount of time required in court as expert witness often puts severe strain on research efforts.

Preventive maintenance of private properties remains the main thrust of Forest-Ag's efforts, but there is continuing and conscious effort to budget time allowing fifty percent for research — for commercial clients and in-house. Thomas feels that in-house research is necessary to develop information and techniques which will make possible better and unique service to clients.

Such in-house projects as climatological correlation of pest outbreaks for developing forecasting services, studies on the relations of rodent feeding and transmission of shade tree root diseases, biological agents for tree wound dressing, and the practical use of mycorrhizal fungi to suppress soil-borne diseases offer exciting breakthroughs in pest management.

He's working with an earthworm grower who sells the earthworm castings for fertilizer. Forest-Ag not only runs the tests to show the analysis of the castings, but studies the relationship of earthworms to the transmission of disease, thus performing two services at one time. Thomas' firm is unique in this way and unique in being one of few (so far as he knows) practicing forest pathologists.

"There are more trees growing in the U.S. now than when the Pilgrims came over," asserts Thomas. "And I'll bet you're going to ask me next why we have so much more trouble with trees than we used to?" "Well, there are, first, more trees. Second, they're growing under stress conditions from the day they are planted. Most trees are not native to where they are being grown. Indeed, they are 'exotic', and so have continual survival problems. It's only natural for trees to have more things happen to them under these conditions."

"That's why," he observes, "I encourage young people to become plant clinicians; partly because of our nation's increasing horticultural awareness, and because there is the obvious real need for people trained as plant pathologists, plant physiologists and arboriculturists. We greatly need more talented young people in forestry and horticulture."

"At the same time I advise such young people to not neglect learning about people, and how to express themselves while pursuing technical subjects. If the practicing specialist can't communicate with a client, the battle for 'green survival' could be lost." **WTT**