

A little makeup enhances the real thing

by Bill Rhymes

We are surrounded by fakery everywhere, from capped teeth to Grecian Formula. Debate continues over fakes in the ornamentals industry. We have seen artificial grass and flowers. Most people do not like them.

Who wants to walk or lie down on plastic grass or be in a restaurant or shopping mall surrounded by plastic plants? Is there any place in the turf and ornamentals industry where a little fakery is acceptable by all? Yes, in the use, at certain times, under certain conditions, of colorants to enhance the beauty of the real thing.

The color of well-managed growing grass, as well as most foliage plants and trees, is green, of course. Green colorants are used in several ways on grass and foliage plants. These green colorants (GCs) are of several types, such as wettable powders, liquids used "as is" and concentrated flowables diluted with water. The last is by far the most economical to use.

The chemical formulations can be organic dyes (OD), inorganic dyes (ID) and specially formulated "paints" of acrylic/latex types (P).

Generally, ODs are short-lived and are used primarily as spray indicators. They are not a natural green grass color, but that does not matter since they fade rapidly and serve their purpose. IDs are natural green color, last several days, and are excellent as spray indicators or for touching up off-color turf. Ps are more enduring, lasting several months, and are non-staining when dry. All are formulated to be safe (non-phytotoxic) to grassplants and non-toxic to mammals, including man.

The widest use of GCs is on dor-

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mant grass. For years, superintendents of major sports stadiums have used GCs to "paint" dormant or off-color turf. However, dormant turf is not the only candidate, as there is a growing use of GCs on actively growing grass.

Several areas in which GCs are used on turf include:

- Athletic fields. Type P on dormant or off-color grass to give a natural instant "summertime" green color.

- Golf course greens, fairways, tees. P used in place of overseeding certain areas. IDs used to touch up off-color and diseased areas, and as a spray indicator. OD used as spray pattern indicator.

- Landscape contractor. Paint on new sod jobs can give a finished, natural look until sod is "pegged down" and growing.

- Professional lawn care. P is used on dormant home and commercial lawns. ID to touch up diseased or damaged areas; OD as spray indicator.

- Miscellaneous. Some odd but successful uses of P have been reported such as: lake dye; mixed with soil to replace divots (would be cheaper to fill divots with soil, then spot spray on top with P); and P on sod sample prior to display at trade shows.

The use of GCs on ornamentals,

while not as extensive as on turf, is growing. Paint is used extensively on freshly cut Christmas trees prior to shipment to return the natural, uniform color where insects or disease might have caused damage.

Landscapers have begun using paint on foliage plants for a more uniform, finished look. In this use, however, care must be taken because too much color on tree branches and trunks can turn them an unnatural green.

Choose wisely

It is important to pick the right product for the right job. An OD, which fades rapidly, should not be used to color dormant turf. Conversely, a paint should not be used as a spray indicator since it is longer lasting. ID should be used only sparingly in mix as a spray indicator because it stains.

Cost-in-use should be studied carefully when selecting a P. A number of products on the market are low cost per gallon, but often that gallon is used as is, or mixed with just six to eight gallons of water. They can also look artificial, with an unnatural color on grass and ornamentals.

The best brand on the market is only slightly more per gallon, and can be mixed with up to 70 gallons of water. It is also the most natural looking, and once dry, won't rub off on uniforms, clothing or equipment.

Some of these products can be phytotoxic to grass and plants. Care should be taken to find one specially formulated to be safe for vegetation and humans. Also, don't be afraid to consult other superintendents, growers, stadium managers and the like. Most will be happy to help in finding the right products for a particular application. Products mentioned in this article are well-known to distributors. They, too, can be helpful in finding the right product.

Nothing is better than a disease- and insect-free, well-managed, natural growing plot of grass or ornamental plant. But when problems occur and nature has taken its course, even the best must use colorants. Using colorants in a wise and timely fashion can improve appearance. Though perfection can't be reached, image can be improved and a lot can be gained.

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