

# COMMON SENSE WEED CONTROL

Is it possible we chemical applicators are caught in our own web of "weed-free" marketing jargon and quick-fix chemicals? Come on, industry, let's get real.

by Phil Christian III

**C**ontrolling weeds in ornamental turf has emerged as one of the most difficult and perhaps most important issues we will face in the 1990s.

According to 1989 surveys, weeds—a natural part of the landscape—continue to be the single biggest source of customer dissatisfaction with lawn care companies. This is caused, in part, by an industry afflicted with unrealistic customer expectations on the amount of weeds acceptable in lawns.

Weeds that distract from the landscape's general appearance are considered symptoms of poor management. But a weed infestation that would threaten the actual health or vigor of the turf would far exceed any visual limits. Therefore, the real issue in weed control is how weeds affect the landscape's visual quality.

If we are going to talk about visual quality, we must set some criteria for how the landscape is viewed. The Mona Lisa, for example, is not very attractive when viewed under a magnifying glass. Step back a few feet within the visual range intended by the artist and it becomes a beautiful work of art.

The landscape, too, should be viewed first from a distance. "Curb appeal" should be judged by walking, standing or driving a few feet from the curb.

## On balance

Part of being in control of the landscape is keeping its various elements in relative balance. This means we must accept the existence of weeds as part of the system.

Weeds that detract from the general health and appearance or balance of the landscape are not acceptable. It is also true that some weeds are more acceptable than others. Some varieties of clover, for example, are the same color as turfgrass and grow at a similar rate. If the turf is correctly

lawn care operators. They have selected you to perform the services on their grass, and they expect your company to live up to all the promises they have heard.

**Your only defense against unrealistic demands and expectations is to tell the customer the truth: there is no such thing as "weed-free."** A company promises to control weeds to the extent that they will not distract from the appearance of a property when viewed from the curb. The one condition to the promise is that the customer and the landscape manager work with the company and follow its instructions to better manage the landscape for acceptable weed control.

You are in this together. We have trained the customer to believe our magic chemicals can provide a "quick fix" for weeds any time we choose to apply it. The truth is, there are numerous limitations to the application of chemicals. At

some point, excess application could do damage to the turf.

Weed control should be viewed as a landscape management issue. Weed control chemicals are used as a supplement to that management program, but they do have limitations.

Do customers understand exactly what their role is in managing weed control? Have they been told, for example, a spring pre-emergent has been applied and should be watered in, and they should avoid mowing for 24 hours, since incorrect mowing practices, hand raking and de-thatching can reduce the effectiveness of the weed control program?

How many times have we made a professional herbicide application

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mowed on schedule, small amounts of clover will not detract from the color or texture of the lawn.

But what about the owner who says, "Don't talk to me about balance or offensive weeds versus non-offensive weeds. You promised weed-free, and that is what I want."

This same customer has been conditioned over the years by the lawn care industry's marketing efforts to think "weed-free." Why? Because companies are agreeing to perform no-charge service calls when customers see a few weeds. The customer who has shopped around in the industry may have heard a variety of unrealistic claims or promises made by

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only to have some action taken by the customer (either before or after the application) negate its effect?

For instance, on Friday afternoon at 1 o'clock, you make a post-emergence herbicide application to a fescue lawn which had not received a pre-emergent in round one. The application was textbook, with 100 percent coverage, perfect timing and perfect weather for maximum results. By 1:15, you are leaving the customer's property congratulating yourself on a "Pride-of-the-Industry" application. At 1:30, the automatic irrigation system (which was supposed to be turned off) comes on, drenching the turf for the next two hours. Total saturation and run-off occurs 30 minutes into the cycle.

At 3:30, the high school student next door shows up on his father's new riding mower with the patented "Whirler-Sucker-Vacuum-Catcher" apparatus, and scalps the fescue down to 1½ inches. The whirling, dull blades, turning at different speeds, chop the turf into chunks while the apparatus strips the soil surface of all organic matter not tied down by a mature root system.

What is the customer most likely to complain about in the coming weeks? You guessed it: weed problems.

What is your response? Perhaps this is the time to implement your new, get-tough, tell-it-like-it-is policy.

**Our responsibilities**

You might politely tell the customer you know what happened to the lawn after your Friday afternoon "State-of-the-Art" professional post-emergent application. You might also tell the customer that your unconditional weed-free warranty has been voided, and a re-spray will be an additional charge.

The customer will most likely respond by saying, "We appreciate your straight talk, and we don't deny that watering and mowing shortly after your application may have had a negative effect on your weed control program. But look at the issue from our point of view. We did not know you planned to make an application on Friday. We did not know you actually made an application on Friday. And we had no idea what we should or should not have done before or after the application, had we known about it. When will you be here to re-spray?"

The customer was not deliberately working against his or her own best interest, or against your best efforts. The customer simply did not know.

You may rationalize or argue that the customer should have requested a pre-call, or the customer should have memorized the fine print in your annual Customer Instruction Booklet.

But—the sad truth is—it is your

responsibility to give the customer clear, timely, step-by-step instructions on turf management before and after herbicide application. In some cases, the information can be just as important as the application. The delivery of one without the other will reduce or perhaps negate the benefits we sell.

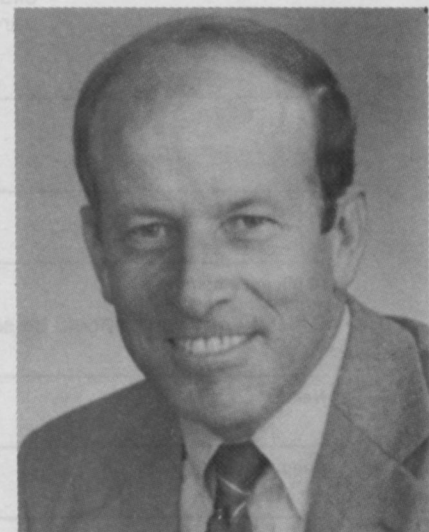
The widely-held belief that weed control is strictly a chemical problem unrealistically places the burden squarely on the chemical applicator's shoulders. A huge information gap exists between the realistic expectation for lawn care applicators and the customer's responsibility to be informed.

Is it possible we, the chemical applicators, are caught in our own web of "weed-free" marketing jargon and quick-fix chemicals? Do we believe that if our pre-emergent treatment is not effective, we will simply kill the weeds with the post-emergent?

The reality is that—if we don't apply the pre-emergent on schedule, in accordance with the label, getting complete coverage of the area, and if we do not follow correct cultural practices—we will have an uphill battle.

We apply substance to the turf, but the customer is neither satisfied nor dissatisfied based on what we put down. They are satisfied or dissatisfied based on the result. The service is almost completely intangible. We are promising a result, and customers do not know whether they are being well-served until they get or do not get what they were promised.

If we allow the existence of weeds to become the evidence of our non-performance, we have stepped into our own trap. **LM**



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