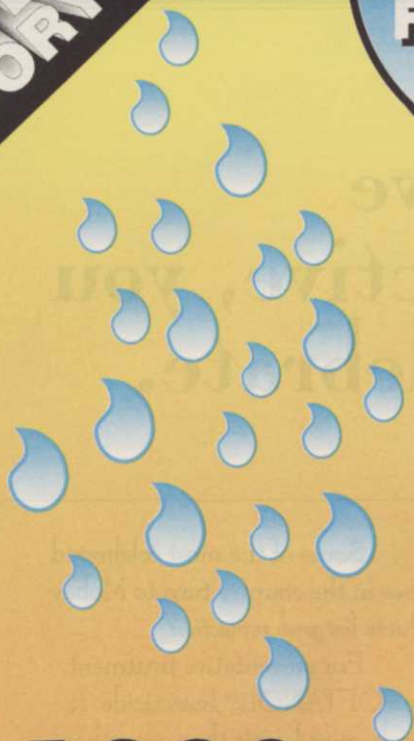


FERTILIZER TRENDS



1980s



1970s  
1990s



# LIQUID VS. DRY: THE PENDULUM SWINGS

As customers demand more dry fertilizers because of what they see in the news, the lawn care industry responds.

by Terry McIver, associate editor

Is the lawn care industry doomed to be forever pestered by image problems?

Like a toy poodle nipping at its heels, outcry against chemical product safety or efficacy are relentless.

Even within the industry itself, there are biases toward certain products—inclinations that have shaped how companies do business.

In this case, the subject is liquid and dry fertilizers: what do you use, and why?

When ChemLawn first treated lawns in the late 1960s, it was the trailblazer in liquid lawn care. High-tech, high-volume was the way to go. By the late 1970s and early 80s, there was a preponderance of liquid lawn care companies.

The image problem began about 1983. Activist and media attention and phrases such as "spray drift" and "runoff" and "seeping into the groundwater" aroused public demand for more granular fertilizer ap-

plications, which many companies were already using.

So we touch ground in the 1990s, although we're not always landing feet first. And beyond the hype and misinformation, there are valid reasons to choose one or the other formulation.

### Agronomic equality

Dr. Chuck Darrah, president of Ag-Vantage, a Columbus, Ohio agricultural consulting firm, says that

agronomically, liquid and dry fertilizers can be used to perform equally.

He reminds turf professionals that, "most nitrogen sources that are used in dry fertilizers are available in liquid form, for example, urea."

Urea is the most commonly-used form of nitrogen in both liquid and dry lawn fertilizers. Darrah says research has shown little or no difference in turf growth and color response to the two forms of N application.

"Likewise," adds Darrah, "the controlled release methylene urea fertilizers as well as the slow release ureaformaldehyde fertilizers and IBDU can be used in liquid sprays or dry fertilizers. Their performance is the same with either application method. The most common exception to this rule is sulfur-coated urea, because it is a product which should only be applied dry. And with a few exceptions the same case can be made for all pesticides. They are available as liquid or dry products and either form can be used to achieve the same results."

#### View from the field

Lawn care professionals interviewed by *Landscape Management* all prefer granular fertilizers over liquid formulations. Their reasons range from the technical to the psychological.

"You don't have as much surge growth—or quick growth—with granular products as you have with liquid applications," says Bob Priest of Personal Touch Lawn Care, Denver.

Tim Combs, of Combs Landscaping in Westlake, Ohio, says his company has used granular products since it entered the lawn care business 20 years ago. Combs prefers granular products because they are less volatile than liquids.

"With the granular," says Combs, "you get it down into the soil with a little better effectiveness."

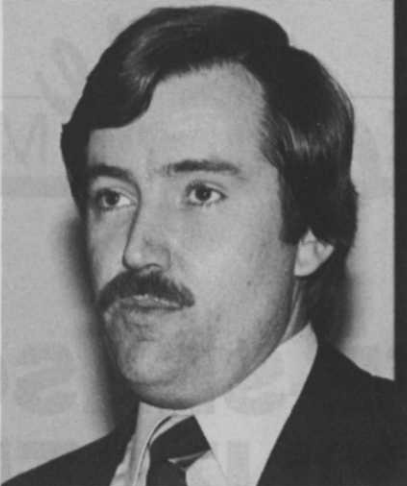
"Another nice thing about a granular product," explains Combs, is that you can target it. Of the four applications we use, only one has a pesticide in it which would be the pre-emergent, pendimethlin. The remainder are straight fertilizer."

Adds Priest: "People prefer granular for a lot of reasons. Granular is more old-fashioned, and I personally feel granular applications are safer."

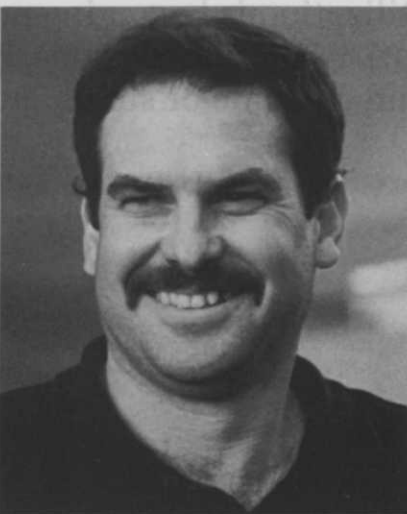
Harper prefers granular products in the fall, since customers are less likely to mow it out.

#### Freedom of flexibility

Darrah stresses the flexibility liquid



Darrah: There is an advantage in being able to use both formulations.



Priest: Granular products safer.

products lend to the lawn care arsenal, and says surge growth is a myth.

"With liquids," says Darrah, "changing N-P-K grades, using a pesticide at different rates or using multiple pesticides can be easily accomplished. With dry materials, specific products need to be planned, purchased, stored and carried to the site to provide as much flexibility."

There are also those special times when a suitable dry material may not be available. At those times, it's liquids to the rescue.

An example Darrah cites is the situation that requires an application of fertilizer, a pre- and post-emergence weed control product, and insecticide simultaneously.

"This can be easily accomplished with liquids," says Darrah, but it means multiple trips over the lawn to accomplish with drys.

#### Initial investment specter

The cost required to outfit trucks and provide for storage is a basic—if unglamorous—reason companies may choose dry fertilizer products.

Mike Turner of Custom Lawns, North Olmsted, Ohio, says that the need to get a business off the ground is

a great motivator.

"When we first went into business," recalls Turner, "it was easier to start up with a dry method of application, in terms of equipment. You don't have that tank truck investment."

That concern is echoed by Bob Mann of Hunt & Hulteen, Brockton, Mass., who says the time to apply liquid and dry products is "pretty much a wash."

"And with the significant investment in a liquid system comes the containment system and regulations," adds Mann. He says the state of Massachusetts has a set of regulations pending which would place restrictions on containment systems.

The "all dry" full-service lawn care programs really don't exist, in Darrah's opinion, because common broadleaf weeds cannot be effectively controlled with dry post-emergence weed control products.

Turner believes there is a growing market for granular products, and cites the recent move by some larger, predominantly liquid chemical lawn care companies to granular products.

Degree of efficacy does not influence Turner's decision to go granular.

"We do about 2400 lawns," he says, "and the net result is usually the same. I wouldn't be upset if my only choice was liquid or if my only choice was granular."

Turner lucks out every so often when he encounters prospects who say flat out, "I don't want the liquid." Those people, says Turner, are already sold on the dry product, and the point is moot.

#### Appearances are everything

It's also not just what you spray, but how you spray it, as one applicator told of a study that showed brown-colored spray hoses are less likely to incite homeowner concern than yellow hoses.

Are some people simply afraid of liquid products? "They want to believe that what a dry company is applying is different than what a liquid company is applying," says Turner, and he offers this example:

After a recent news report on a court decision concerning ChemLawn (see "Green Industry News," this issue), a customer told Turner she was glad to have him as her lawn man. "I wouldn't want what they put on the lawn," the customer said.

Turner's reply: "We put the same thing down that ChemLawn does. And it's the same product that you're going to be buying at your garden center." **LM**