

Natural organics: new aroma, new image

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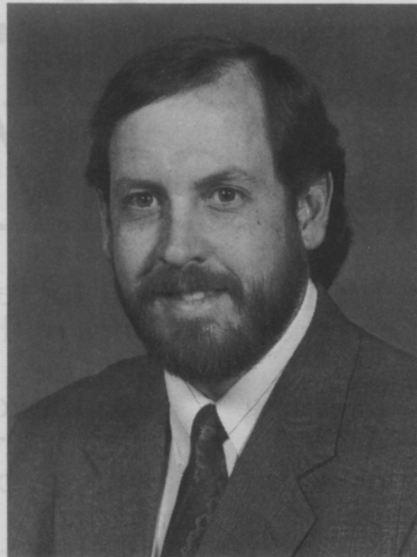
Our first thought of natural organic fertilizers appear as a stereotype of an unprocessed material that is difficult to handle, offends a person's sense of smell and belongs on farm fields. That has all changed, thanks to improved process technology and quality control.

Natural organic fertilizers are still manufactured from the byproducts of various industries. There are, however, new, often high-tech, manufacturing technologies available in the areas of drying, granulating, dust control, and odor control that create very acceptable final products.

The bottom line in making a fertilizer purchase decision is, "does the product give affordable results while being easy to handle?" With today's natural organic fertilizer, the answer is a resounding "yes".

Natural organics are the original slow-release fertilizer that many synthetic slow-release fertilizers strive to mimic. The natural organics rely on soil biota to release the nutrients, and are also the original homogenous fertilizers. All the nutrients are contained in each granule. These products also feature a very low burning potential, micronutrients, and large amounts of organic matter.

Most are granular, relatively dust free, and easy to spread. Some, such as sludges, are excellent for melting ice or frost. Processed natural organic fertilizers have been included in university turf and agronomic trials since the early part of this century. Recently, a wide variety of natural organic products have been included in university trials across the U.S. and Canada. In conversations with researchers, and in reviewing the literature, one learns



Jim Spindler: Organics are now affordable, easy to handle.

that natural organic fertilizers perform in the areas of turf quality as well and often better than their synthetic counterparts. Specifically, research has shown that natural organics, due to their slow release nature, are often a more efficient nutrient source than some synthetic slow release fertilizers. This feature is valuable in that clipping yields are reduced while maintaining high quality. In addition, natural organics have been linked in some studies to reduced thatch layers, increased soil microbe activity, and decreases in both disease and insect occurrence.

Easy on the environment

Besides being an excellent nutrient source, the use of natural organic fertilizers is beneficial to the environ-

ment. They provide a beneficial reuse of our society's waste products that often would consume limited landfill space or be dumped in environmentally sensitive locations, such as the oceans or other waterways. While being efficient and effective fertilizers, natural organics have proven themselves to be beneficial in helping to protect groundwater, and have performed comparably to synthetic slow release fertilizers in ground water studies.

Natural organic fertilizers are exciting because of their diversity and flexibility. They come from a variety of sources, including sewage and industrial sludges (tanneries, paper mills, cheese factories), animal production and processing operations, seaweed and other sources. Each of these products has different characteristics, much as synthetic fertilizers have varying characteristics. Natural organics are versatile in that they can be used in a variety of applications and in combination with other fertilizers. The attributes of both natural organic and synthetic fertilizers can be combined to create a superior product.

Look beyond price

It is said that natural organics are more expensive; sometimes they are. However, when making a fertilizer purchase decision, look at the whole package. Natural organic fertilizers typically have large amounts of water insoluble nitrogen (WIN). Some products have greater than 90 percent of their nitrogen as WIN. When comparing the actual cost of nitrogen on a per unit of WIN basis, it turns out that natural organics are a bargain! Nitrogen is not the only nutrient in natural organics which is slow release; in fact, all the nutrients are. The slow release nutrients coupled with high organic matter content, and product versatility give natural organics a much greater value than a simple N-P-K fertilizer.

Certainly, natural organic fertilizers are an old concept, however, the modern versions of these "original" fertilizers have proven themselves valuable in landscape maintenance, and are here to stay. **LM**

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