

Biological/chemical mix works, thanks to customer education

Customers must have realistic expectations, says company partner.

■ The Pro-Grass company of Portland, Ore. is now using biological control products in its integrated pest management program. The secret to customer acceptance of biological products, says Pat Nibler, is effective customer education.

"We try to take a realistic view of our customers' environments," says Nibler. "For example, there aren't a lot of insects or disease that will kill a plant outright. So the key is to keep them in check rather than eliminate them out-

right. We want to meet our customers' needs at a price they can afford.

"We'll tell them we won't eliminate all the pests. Our customers need to have realistic expectations, and the only way that can happen is if our people to take the time from the beginning to educate them," says Nibler.

The company tried Javelin, a *Bacillus thuringiensis* product, to control tent caterpillars. They've since been using M-Pede, an insecticide/miticide derived from naturally occurring fatty acids. Nibler says it's an excellent "knockdown" material and synergistic tank mix partner for control of soft-bodied pests.

Product rotation prevents resistance. "We will start off with a pyrethrin in the early spring and then we'll use M-

Pede in tank mixtures with other insecticides on soft-bodied insects such as aphids and mites, then maybe switch to oils later in the summer," says Nibler.

Pro-Grass tank mixes different pesticides together to control a wide range of pests. For example, a mix of M-Pede and Tempo, Orthene, or Dursban will control soft-bodied insects and caterpillars.

Nibler estimates biopesticides add between 30 to 40 percent to his product cost, "but we have found that better trained employees know how to use less of the more expensive materials and still get the job done."

Employees are assets. Nibler and partner Paul Bizon say employee education is a major reason the company has been so successful during its 15 year history of lawn care and landscaping in Portland, Seattle and Concord, Calif.

Nibler sees an influx of national landscape maintenance companies along the West Coast, and believes that Pro-Grass's dedication to employees keeps competitors at bay.

"If we can retain our good employees and enable them to build up some real experience," says Nibler, "then we can offer a degree of expertise, knowledge and maybe even accessibility; the nationals may not be able to match where we do business."

"We've constantly tried to create a culture where this is more than just a job to the employee," says Nibler. "We think that's the backbone of our company and our success over the years, and it affects many aspects of how we run our business."

No 'multiple guess' tests

Employee education at Pro-Grass includes updates on pesticide regulations and compliance, taught by Steve Varga, who has a degree in horticulture from Colorado State University.

● Two or three times each month, Varga issues a training module to all branches. Each branch has its own designated instructor.

● The material is reviewed with employees, who are then tested.

"And we're not talking true-false or multiple choice," notes Nibler. "The employees have to know the answers and we keep track of their scores. We've found this to be an extremely important program for new technicians and a worthwhile refresher course for our veterans."

● Employees also receive weekly pesticide updates. "They all have their commercial applicator's license and we want them to think and work as professionals," says Nibler.

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