

LAWN CARE INDUSTRY

Path to lawn care knowledge often steep and exhausting

by Ron Hall, senior editor

■ The longer I follow the Lesco broadcast spreader, the more the mustard-colored granules look like tiny, hard-bodied insects trying to escape a predator. I push the spreader; they frantically jump away, pelting the papery, curled leaves in the grass like a dry rain, skittering over cast iron water meter covers and patches of bare clay where tenants had parked barbecue grills.

Turf fertilizer hopping like fat brown and yellow fleas?

I know I'm fatigued. My legs quit complaining two hours ago. They're leaden. But hallucinations?

Yesterday, we—owner Steve Bailey, college senior Ron Sandrock and myself—had planned to kick off Grassroot Lawn's season by treating one of its biggest accounts, an apartment complex with 480,000 sq. ft. of turfgrass, about half of it sliced into tiny grassy triangles, rectangles and other assorted shapes. That's what you get with a dozen apartment buildings

designed and built into a sloped ravine along a small stream.

It rained, so Steve spent the soggy afternoon instructing me on the science of pushing a spreader. Steve views correct application—judging by the intensity of his instruction—as something slightly less precise than laser surgery. Okay, I exaggerate a bit. Anyway, he apologizes for being so thorough. He'll be too busy to look over anybody's shoulder once we start, he explains.

Tuesday, March 22, just north of Columbus, Ohio, is a perfect day. There's breeze enough to keep clouds scuttling across the sky and a near-perfect 65°F, but I've been walking so persistently that I still have to reach around with my right arm to unstick the back of the blue cotton work shirt from my back. Perspiration slides down my back. Any exertion more



Two days of pushing a spreader reaffirmed Senior Editor Hall's decision to remain a journalist.

lively than the pace I've fallen into behind this spreader causes me to pant.

I'm just finishing my first-ever 9½-hour day as a lawn applicator. I admit to being both more exhausted and more self-satisfied than I should be. I'm also feeling a tinge of guilt. Just a tinge.

I'll only be a lawn applicator a couple of days. That thought, with increasing and undeniable relief, is always in my mind.

In a few days I'll return to the real world—the blinking computer screen, the telephone and steaming cup of tea. Dew never covers the carpet there. I never push a spreader or run a lawn care company in my 8- by 12-foot office with its shoulder-high petitions.

My partner Ron Sandrock slides a cheap pen from the pocket of his work shirt and scribbles some numbers on the side of the bag he's just hoisted onto the fender of the trailer. He probably doesn't weigh 150 lbs. I'm surprised every time he horses another 50-lb. bag of Scotts fertilizer out of the trailer. He does it so easily.

It seems like I've wrestled a lot more than the 40 bags we stacked onto the trail-

You spread fertilizer, we spread information

■ I think back to when I got the idea of actually working as a lawn technician, then writing about it.

"But what could anyone learn about spreading fertilizer? I'm sure they already know all they need to know about it," said Steve Bailey to my offer. That's when I asked if I could help kick off his first round of lawn applications.

Bailey had a point. How could I shed new light on this subject to Bailey, charter member of the Ohio Lawn Care Association, graduate of nearby Ohio State University, owner/operator of Grassroots Lawn & Irrigation? What insight could I provide anyone calling himself a lawn care professional?

Not being able to come up with a convincing answer—either for Bailey or for myself—I asked, "But you could use some help, couldn't you?" He was honest enough to say he could.

But I do advise people like Bailey how to do these things more efficiently or more profitably. More accurately, I guess I don't advise them—who the deuces am I to advise them? Information: sure. Advice: no. I gather information from others in the business particularly good at one facet or another of lawn care, and pass it on. I sometimes go to unusual lengths—and my employer to unusual expense—to get this information. Then we publish it.

—R.H.

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er just after daybreak. Now we've got a truck bed full of empties.

Ron says we have just enough product to finish one remaining ridge. Maybe half a bag between our two spreaders, and two 50-lb. bags, one for him, one for me. At $\frac{1}{2}$ lb. of N per 1,000 sq. ft., that should just about do it, says Sandrock.

He's a senior at Ohio State, studying turfgrass, and wants to be a golf course superintendent. That much he shares. But mostly he's quiet.

The grassy hill, with several apartment buildings lining its top, is maybe 70 yards long, 30 yards wide. Until I started tiring just before noon I didn't even notice it. As the day advances, and I treat the dozens of smaller triangles and rectangles of turfgrass surrounding it, it grows. Starting as a mere hillock, it keeps swelling as I push that spreader, and now it's finally high enough to be snow-capped, like Everest. In my mind it is. One thing for sure: it's too steep for the little tractor and spreader that Bailey had used on the long, flat turfgrass areas earlier in the day.

Since Sandrock, like myself, unaccountably saved this hill—the largest and steepest on the property—for last, I suspect he's hardly eager to tackle it either.

"You take the higher end of the ridge. It looks a little more level up there," he suggests, surmising that the needle on my gas tank is quivering on E, "and I'll start in this corner. We'll probably meet about halfway up the hill."

He's right. We do. Except for some clean-up and getting the spreaders back to the shop and put away, we're done.

Tomorrow we start with another commercial property, half as large and almost completely flat. Then there's a 50,000-sq. ft. property ("It's easy," grins Sandrock.), and then residences, most of them the 8,000-10,000 sq. ft. variety.

That's when I'll cut out, when we get to the home lawns. Ron can handle them more efficiently by himself.

Being a professional lawn applicator is definitely a job for a younger man with younger legs.



Grassroots Lawn Care & Irrigation started its application season on March 17. Applicators: (left to right) Hall, Ron Sandrock, owner Steve Bailey.

10 things I discovered as a lawn rookie

■ In the course of a long hard day, the professional turf applicator's life shrinks to just two dimensions: turfgrass (treat it) and not-turfgrass (don't treat it).

Richer, more weighty thoughts seem to be particularly hard to come by behind a lawn spreader or tugging at a spray hose. So you can imagine my difficulty in boiling down my short-lived experience as a lawn applicator to these few simple observations. (I probably could have come up with more, given another couple of days on the job.)

10) Never try to push a full spreader around the steepest part of a hill. A spreader with 80 lbs. of product handles like an over-loaded coal truck—except the truck has brakes.

9) If the lady of the house happens to be walking to her mailbox as you're approaching at right angles with your spreader full bore, throttle back, give her the right-of-way and politely smile and nod as she peruses the day's mail.

8) Never, ever spray dogs with product, no matter how much of a mess they've left in the grass. The same goes for kids—large or small, chained or unchained.

7) Don't try to pick up every little scrap of paper lying in your path on a big job like condos or apartments. But you're expected to move, if you can, picnic tables for a more uniform application. (What about old tires?)

6) Wear a hat no matter how much hair you have. Comfortable work boots, gloves and long sleeves are more than handy too, unless you enjoy sunburn, blisters and scratches.

5) Pack a broom on the truck. Blowers are great but, being mechanical, they can fail. In some situations they're too noisy.

4) Go to the bathroom just before you arrive at a big job site. Don't gamble on finding public facilities.

3) Discriminate: put turf fertilizer only where there's turf, or a reasonable expectation of turf—meaning you don't have to ram your spreader beneath most evergreens or trees with prickly spines (i. e. don't be too fine in fertilizing beneath Hawthorne trees).

2) Don't use your prized baseball hat to mark where you've left off while you retreat to refill your spreader, particularly not near sidewalks. "Uhhh, nice hat," the passing mailman says appraisingly as the applicator hustles back to the site.

1) Make a map of big properties or of properties with lots of little turfgrass areas. It doesn't have to be fancy, just reasonably accurate to show the location and size of the areas you're treating. When you finish a section, color it on the map. Also, a map will help you find your way back to the truck at day's end.

—R.H.