

Tough season tests N.Y. firm's faith in IPM

by RON HALL / Senior Editor

This past season tested Laurie Broccolo's faith in IPM. But, as the 1996 season approaches, she's even more committed to the treatment program that balances control product applications with cultural controls and pest monitoring.

"By the third round we had doubled our labor," says the owner of Broccolo Tree & Lawn Care, Rochester, N.Y. "We used two persons per truck be-



Broccolo's staff (l. to r.): Mark Gemmill, Albert Broccolo, Amy Lidie, Steve Desmond, Mida Bristol, Jason Rumsey, Laurie Broccolo, Louis Dannenberg, Cindy Halm

cause we were finding so many problems.

"While our seasonal employees applied granular fertilizer, our IPM specialists spot treated for crabgrass, scouted and treated for insects. They also left a lot of notes telling homeowners how to water and mow."

Broccolo altered her firm's 1995 mid-season program because of the freaky weather in lakefront Rochester. Instead of cool Lake Ontario breezes, a stubborn drought and weeks of stifling 90° F heat

stressed people and plants alike.

Crabgrass thrived in the heat, while grubs burrowed even deeper into the soil only to migrate closer to the growing zone and begin feeding on stunted turfgrass roots several weeks later than usual.

"It was a frustrating season. The weather conditions were terrible. We were miserable," says Broccolo.

Moreover, almost 25 percent of her customers had requested service calls. This was too high, both she and her staff felt.

By August when Ed Wandtke, a green industry consultant from Columbus, Ohio, visited her company, Broccolo admits everyone needed a pep talk.

"We took a day off. It was hard to because we were not quite done with the third round. But I wanted Ed Wandtke to talk to us about service and service calls," says Broccolo.

And what she and her staff learned was encouraging: they were actually doing a good job in light of conditions. In fact, they were experiencing significantly fewer service calls than companies using traditional calendar blanket applications of pesticides.

"By the time we got to the fourth round, our customers had a good understanding about their problems and about the weather," says Broccolo. "They were prepared to do some seeding. We did an excellent seeding business."

Broccolo formed many of her ideas about IPM from her days at Finger Lakes Community College, and while working 13 years for a large lawn/landscape company. In fact, she helped implement some IPM principles into that company's program.

When she started her own company five years ago, she built it with IPM at its center. But still she needed equipment to make her ideas work. Fortunately, she says, Tom Jessen at Perma-Green in Crown Point, Ind., provided molded, fiberglass tanks with compartments that fit neatly into the back of one-ton, dual-wheel Chevy pickups.

The separate tanks and pump/injection system allows IPM specialists to apply liquid fertilizer and pull a second trigger and spot treat for weeds at the same time. The specialist can also use the setup to treat trees while on a property.

"I try to dispel the myth that pesticides are a problem," explains Broccolo. "We don't want that myth out there, but I also want customers to feel comfortable that we're not going to treat if it's not

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Getting started with IPM

- ▶ Include spot-treating weed control in your program, not blanket treatments, unless necessary.
- ▶ Pick a route with fewer insect problems. Do not treat unless the pests are visible and active.
- ▶ Keep a history of lawn problems by mapping regions for inspection.
- ▶ Implement computerized tracking with IPM software such as Practical Solutions to help in training and decision-making in the field.

—Laurie Broccolo

needed.

My company focuses on selling our expertise."

Broccolo points to her employees—and low employee turnover—as crucial to her company's continuing success.

"Everybody in our company is committed to an IPM philosophy whether it's our field staff or our office personnel," she says.

But, beyond that, they must also be technically knowledgeable, and confident enough about their diagnostic abilities to make on-site decisions based on a property's weed, insect or disease history.

"They can't wait for me to run to a property,

take a look at it and talk to their customer," explains Broccolo. "If we've got something critical going on, they have to make those decisions and talk to their customers."

Of course, there's a lot of communication within the company too, she adds. All

company trucks are equipped with two-way radios. She and her staff meet for an hour each week to discuss what they're seeing on their routes.

This insistence on tracking and communication allows field specialists to meet problems as they arise.

For instance, 1995 was the most troublesome grub season that her company has experienced to date. Even so, her specialists, after scouting and finding out where grubs were a problem, treated about 25 percent of customers' property. She estimates her company saved \$19,000 in 1995 by not making a blanket application of grub control products.

"If we scout and find one or two grubs per square feet, we don't treat. We only treat areas that need to be treated, areas that will be stressed. For instance, we usually won't treat areas in shade because they probably won't be stressed," she says. Routes with heavy clay soils often don't experience grub problems, either.

The insistence on scouting and keeping detailed records of each property creates added expense, admits Laurie. Also, specialists at her company don't do as much production as companies that make calendar blanket applications. But she feels the IPM approach is appreciated by most of her customers. It also has boosted her company's status with other local landscape and tree companies that routinely refer work to her company.

Broccolo Tree & Lawn Company has grown steadily, if not spectacularly, and now numbers 10 full-time plus seasonal employees.

Equally satisfying to Laurie and her staff—its customer cancellation rate is below 10 percent.

"In my market, we can charge about 10 percent more for a typical five-visit lawn care program," she says. "All the customer really wants is service and results."

Broccolo's advice to any other lawn care business converting its program to integrated pest management (IPM) is simple—do it one step at a time. □



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