

Sell clients on concept of Plant Health Care

PHC is a system to allow the original design intent of any landscape to develop by improving overall plant health and vigor.

The focus is not solely on pests.

By TOM SMITH

Many landscape professionals practice the concept known as Integrated Pest Management (IPM), but I believe that a system of Plant Health Care (PHC) is a better approach to proper landscape management. That's because PHC encompasses all management practices, and doesn't focus solely

on "pests".

PHC is a complete system to allow the original design intent of any landscape to develop by improving overall plant health and vigor. The building blocks of PHC are:

- ▶ proper design and site placement
- ▶ proper site preparation and establishment
- ▶ species and cultivar adaptability and resistance to pest problems
- ▶ proper cultural practices (irrigation, pruning, fertilization, mowing, mulching)
- ▶ pest management

All are combined to establish and maintain healthy, vigorous landscape plants. No one strategy is necessarily more important than any other. All are needed in a PHC operating system. But, recognize that as you go down the above list of strategies, flexibility decreases.

Poor decisions during design and site placement, or during site preparation and establishment, or in plant selection severely restrict later management options.

It's a pyramid

Visualize the landscaping process as a pyramid. The base of the pyramid is design, site placement, site preparation and establishment. The stronger the base, the stronger the overall landscape. At the peak of the pyramid is the use of pesticides.

As landscape managers we often inherit the mistakes of others. These include poorly prepared and compacted subsoils. Inappropriate species or cultivar selection. Poor establishment practices and/or timing. Any of these mistakes complicate long-term management success.

The effects of these mistakes can't be corrected solely by the use of pesticides. Pesticides are not a quick fix at the expense of sound management practices. Relying too much on pesticides is careless. Pesticides are too valuable to lose through carelessness.

A system

Rather than relying on a product-based management system,

develop a PHC knowledge-based system. Use these steps:

1) Initial inspection. Make the initial inspection as detailed as possible. Include information like species and cultivars; cultural practices; soil profile and texture; drainage; soil test information; weed, insect or disease activity; date of establishment.

Don't forget to note the expectations of the owner or property manager.

Use the the information you develop during the inspection to build a management plan containing appropriate specifications and recommendations. This is also the stage to predict pest problems and devise control strategies.



Tom Smith, president of Grass Roots, Inc., East Lansing, Mich.



A median strip offers special challenges in picking site-adapted landscape plants.

2) **Develop a management plan.** While the process may seem involved, a lot of the information gathered during an inspection will be common to many sites. Generally it's a matter of deciding what specific information applies to a specific landscape. On smaller sites, write the plan at the time of inspection, or supply a management sheet with the appropriate items marked. Larger sites may require more input and a lengthier report done separate from the inspection visit.

Obviously, the customer or property manager must agree with you on the need for the plan, and accept it. That's where your skills as a communicator are tested.

3) **Monitoring and care based on the management plan.** Care of the landscape is accomplished through a series of visits to the site. In essence, each visit becomes an inspection. At times, no treatment may be needed but the site would still be monitored and inspected. Target pesticides to high risk areas or areas where pest activity is present. Spray systems that inject materials at the gun or allow small quantity mixing on the vehicle are well suited to a PHC operation.

4) **Evaluation and modification of the management plan.** This step is easily neglected. But it's critical. Proper management requires evaluation and adjustment.

Certain sites will require little modification while others will require considerable change. This is almost always good change as problem sites respond to proper management and inputs decrease.



A properly designed landscape consisting of a combination of trees, shrubs, perennials and turf not only looks attractive but can also be maintained with a minimum input of chemical control products.

You must communicate

Even so, the need to communicate with the property owner or property manager continues. This often is what makes or breaks a sound plan. Keep clients informed of the management plan, the monitoring and care visits and the subsequent evaluation of the program. Help the customer develop realistic expectations.

The technician that conducts site visits and provides services should be a good communicator too, in addition to being knowledgeable about turf and landscapes. If possible, the technician should be involved at all stages of the process.

A mistake often made in marketing PHC is to offer a traditional product-based plant care option and a PHC option. It's better to implement proper management principles in a gradual transition away from a product-based management approach.

Practices such as targeting pesticides, offering additional fertilizer recommendations and developing fact sheets detailing cultural practices and pest problems are simple ways to ease into a PHC system. If you look closely at your current operation you will likely recognize many PHC principles at work.

Based on knowledge

Our industry has always talked about service but a large segment of it does not make any money unless it sells and applies a product. This is wrong. A doctor, dentist, or lawyer all charge for their expertise. So does a plumber or even an auto mechanic. Try talking the repairman for your washer out of his service charge.

With a PHC approach, doing nothing is a viable option in certain cases. What makes it viable in these certain cases is that it is also a good option horticulturally or environmentally. Unless we charge for our

ability to make this type of management decision, we can not operate with a PHC approach profitably.

Money well spent is a powerful inducement to a consumer. PHC eliminates unnecessary treatments and manages the landscape as a unique entity and not just as another stop in a tanker truck's route.

PHC does not eliminate pesticides. Instead, it personalizes service and meets the needs of consumers, making pesticides one of many valuable management tools available for a particular landscape. □

Tom Smith spoke about PHC at the 1997 Metropolitan Detroit Landscape Association Conference in Novi, Mich.