

# Don't gamble with product choices

*It's your money, and those plants belong to you and your customers. Be satisfied that a product you may buy will work as it should.*

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**N**early every day as a landscape or turf manager, you are faced with the responsibility of buying products. There are many to choose from, and lots of people want your money.

Most buying choices are made from experience. We either rely on our own experience or we may rely on the experience and advice of others. There is no question

true? When a very new product comes on the market all these questions become very important.

## **They're your plants!**

One of the problems is that many new products may not have been extensively tested before they are marketed. The manufacturer is asking you to use the product on your plants, and the product will do one of three things: it may kill the plant; it may make it grow better; or it may do nothing.

Whatever happens, it happens to your plants.

Product claims are expensive to prove. That's one reason why pesticides are so costly to develop. The formulator must prove the products will do what the formulator says they will do, and also prove that the products are safe for the environment.

The Environmental Protection Agency has established some tough requirements. Other non-pesticide products do not necessarily have to prove the claims they make to any great degree. Some can only offer their own limited testing as evidence of their claims. Others give us trial samples and hope some trial users will be willing to make some positive comments about their products.

To be sure, some very good products find their way onto the market each year, and the manufacturers or formulators may not have had the money to do the type of testing that could truly demonstrate the value of those products.

## **Climate considerations**

The hard line position taken by many managers is that any product should be able to back up any claim by irrefutable, third-party research. This simply means



**Don't be bashful about asking to test or use a piece of equipment prior to buying it.**

that experience is the best teacher but from time to time, new products are introduced, with which we have no experience at all.

With each new product usually come a variety of claims. The bottom line with any product is: will it do what the manufacturer claims it will do? Is it worth the money? Can it do any harm? Can you believe the claims that the manufacturer makes about the product? What real evidence is there that any of the claims are

that a claim should be tested by someone that does not gain in any way from the sale of that product.

There are many examples that demonstrate the need to make sure that the product claims have been adequately tested. We've had many instances of turfgrass varieties and other plants performing well in one part of the country, and not so well in other parts, even though they were both planted in the same zone. It's a fact that some plants only perform well in a very specific environment and if they were not tested in several different environments, the buyer may not have any knowledge of the plant's limits. This is one reason why the National Turfgrass Evaluation Program (NTEP) is so valuable. In this program, new turfgrass varieties are tested in a wide variety of environments over several years.

It is very possible for all kinds of products, such as fertilizers, soil amendments and other chemicals to do very well when tested by their developer and not do well for you.

Just like the example of plants performing well only in a very narrow environment, other products may present the same kind of problem. A product producer should have adequately tested his product to back up every claim, including the claim that it will work under your conditions. If the producer of the product can't present independent evidence that it has been tested under your conditions, you should beware.

This is not meant to give producers a hard time, but they should be responsible for the product claims that they make. As it has been said many times, if a product claim seems too good to be true, it may mean that it's not true.

#### **Turn to universities for help**

All states have at least one land grant university. These universities are charged to conduct agricultural research. That may include both ornamental plant and turf-

## *When faced with a questionable new product claim, ask for a copy of an independent research study that can verify that claim.*

grass research. Your tax money pays for these activities. For years, many professionals just like you have depended on these studies to provide information such as the best plants to use, what fertilizers are best and when to apply them, all pesticide application details and so on.

Field days at your local land grant university should be a must. This is a great

Research studies must be carefully designed and the results analyzed mathematically. All this to make sure the results are really different and not due to random occurrence.

Most universities have and are going through fairly severe budget cuts and many of the research studies that we have grown to rely on are in jeopardy.

We may be close to losing our one, best source of independent product research. As the state research money decreases, many researchers have been forced to turn to the product producers for support. This could mean that these once independent research programs that we've relied on, may be driven by commercial interest.

Researchers must conduct research projects to get promotions and in the end keep their jobs. If the university can't fund the research, the researcher may have to turn to

the outside for support. Research may stop reflecting local needs but become more allied with commercial interests. I think we all lose when that happens.

When faced with a new product claim that you question, just ask for a copy of an independent research study that can verify that claim. The more a product or any kind is subjected to good, third party research over many different environmental conditions, the better the chance that it will do what it says on the label for you. **LM**



**Research must be carefully designed and results analyzed mathematically to make sure results are meaningful, accurate.** Photo courtesy DowEanco

time to review all the research work for yourself.

Many new product producers provide grant money so that their products are included in the research program. The university then publishes research results, regardless of the outcome.

All research studies have a very simple goal. That goal is to look at what a product does and determine if that it does is a random occurrence or if it is real. For example, if a fertilizer is applied to a plant and it begins to grow, research can tell us if the new growth was indeed due to the fertilizer or was a result of a change in temperature, or a change in moisture or caused by any other factor.