

# Set **your** company apart

*Differentiate yourself from your competition by targeting consumers interested in environmentally friendly fertilization methods*

By CHUCK PAULSON AND  
MIKE ARCHER

**I**t's relatively easy today to build turf programs capable of approaching perfection, at least for a while. But, even with customers' desire for high quality turf, there's also a desire for methods that are considered "environmentally friendly."

Many lawn care businesses are looking for ways to differentiate themselves from their competition in today's fast-paced world of new product development, and they are watching for opportunities in the area of turf management. One option is to focus on the

changes that follow in the wake of a maturing market and to take advantage of emerging opportunities for improving the quality of turf and the bottom line.

#### **A new approach?**

For many companies, an organically-based program is considered simply not feasible, and even a solid Integrated Pest Management (IPM) program has often been considered to be difficult to implement and sell. It can be difficult to explain the benefits to the clients and justify higher prices, compared to less expensive competitors.

Phil Catron of NaturaLawn of America, however, says that IPM is more than a program; it's philosophy and way of doing business. "It has to do with your decision-making process on whether you are treating the symptom or trying to solve the problem," he says, "and how you approach solving the problem through prevention, monitoring and control."

Continued progress in the area of IPM means new developments provide a proven range of effective active ingredients that reduce the impact they have on the environment. By bringing valid attention to a genuine desire to use safer products in reduced amounts, lawn care professionals can reduce the active ingredient load in the environment. This approach can be instrumental in gaining favor with the customer.

#### **Fertilizer options**

The basis of the lawn care programs of NaturaLawn of America are their organic-based fertilizers, blended by Spring Valley Turf Products. This is a good place to start in differentiating from the competition.

While NaturaLawn of America has its own

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## Phocus on Phosphorus

As a landscape or grounds manager, shouldn't you know the basics about the products you use? Take phosphorus, for instance. See how well you do on this quiz, based on an article written by Dr. Peter Landschoot, Penn State University.

**1. Phosphorus is extremely important in:**

- a. encouraging plant color
- b. rooting, cell division and synthesis of chemical compounds
- c. enhancing water takeup in the plant

**2. Phosphorus cannot move from one portion of a plant to another**

- a. true
- b. false

**3. Turf that is deficient in phosphorus turns purple or red**

- a. true
- b. false

**4. Too much phosphorus may affect iron and zinc uptake**

- a. true
- b. false

**5. Phosphorus should be incorporated into the soil prior to seeding or sodding**

- a. true
- b. false

**6. Phosphorus can enter surface waters via erosion and runoff.**

- a. true
- b. false

**Answers:**

**1. B.** Phosphorus (P) is extremely important in seedling development, rooting, cell division and the synthesis of various chemical compounds used by plants.

**2. False.** Phosphorus is available to turfgrasses as  $H_2PO_4$  and  $HPO_4$  and is mobile in plants — meaning that it can move from one portion of the plant to another.

**3. True.** Deficiencies of this nutrient in turf are usually expressed as purple- or red-colored leaf blades and as reduced growth and tillering.

**4. True.** Excessive P concentrations in plant tissue (greater than 1.0% on a dry weight basis) may have adverse effects on iron and zinc uptake and metabolism.

**5. True.** Phosphorus is largely immobile in soils — meaning that it takes a long time to move from the turf surface into the root zone. It may take months to move just a few inches in soil.

**6. True.** Although P is not readily leached from soils into ground water, recent surveys have shown that it can enter surface waters via erosion and runoff. Avoid applying P fertilizer where runoff is likely — such as on frozen soils and paved surfaces.

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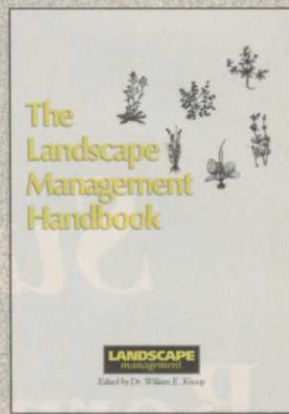
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specially blended products, which gives it the additional marketing tool of uniqueness, there is a range of products available to lawn care companies looking for a way to separate themselves from the pack. These include organic-based materials, a combination of natural-organic and synthetic-organic materials, which allows

for maximizing the benefits of fertilizer applications. Organic-based products can range from 25% organic material to 100% organic. Anything less than 100% is organic-based.

True, early organic products were often ineffective and costly when compared to the traditional approach. Many products

were dusty, possessed an offensive odor, had a limited shelf life or had use rates that were simply impractical for broadcast application. But now, some fertilizer formulators blend complete N-P-K fertilizers that contain both biological and traditional components. The customer's desire for high product quality, availability, competitive pricing and lower environmental impact are being met and often exceeded. To satisfy the needs of the turf professional,

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*Field studies indicate that there is better interaction between nutrients, turfgrass and plant microbes in soils that have adequate organic matter.*

manufacturers of these products must specify ingredients that blend well, do not degrade, are readily available and provide definite environmental benefits.

#### Here are the benefits

According to Catron, most fertilizers are designed to feed the turf. While this is necessary, feeding the soil is often overlooked. "It is old-fashioned agronomics. It is simply understanding plant nutrition and understanding that you're dealing with a soil environment that's full of organisms. And if you feed all these organisms, they, in turn, will feed the turfgrass."

Catron looks at it as an investment into the soil where you can get a healthier plant that "withstands disease and insect problems and reduces the overall use of any kind of controls, whether they're biological or synthetic."

Field studies indicate that there is better interaction between nutrients, turfgrass and plant microbes in soils that have adequate organic matter. As the nutrient program approaches this balance in the soil,

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the quality and health of the turfgrass improves. Increased rooting and turf density reduce the reliance on pesticide use also.

### Economic benefits?

The price difference between organic-based fertilizers and synthetic fertilizers has narrowed, but organic-based materials still tend to be more expensive. So can you justify a higher-priced product? Well, if a solid program means that you can reduce your use of other materials, the answer is yes.

Catron says that yearly comparative data at NaturaLawn of America data indicates that they use 80% less control materials than a traditional lawn care company, for weed and insect controls, and over 97% of the applications that they do make for insects are biologically based.

In addition, increases in earthworm populations, mixing of organic materials into the soil and decreases in thatch all contribute to the condition of the soil, and can only benefit the turf, which ultimately will impact the types and extents of treatments required.

### How do you start?

Well, besides finding a supplier of organic-based products and updating your ad in the Yellow Pages, it is important to have a good understanding of the nutritional aspects of the turf you are dealing with.

Catron advises people to look down the road and see the long-term benefits. Changing your materials is an easy step, he says. The tough change is adapting your approach and training, and involving your employees to make good decisions and not to treat a disease symptom as soon as they see it. If you are building soil as well as turf, you want to give the soil organisms and insects a chance to do their job.

*Chuck Paulson is the National Sales Director and Mike Archer is Product Manager for Spring Valley Turf Products, Jackson, WI.*

## Fertilization and nutrition products

**Emerald Isle's GroWin** rootzone biostimulant produces an additive response over and above fertilizers and amendments.

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**Harmony Products is offering Complete 14-3-6 1% Iron, 6-2-12 3% Iron Bridge Products and the new Complete 7-2-5 4% Iron.**

New 7-2-2 4% Iron features secondary and micro-nutrients including 4% iron, seaweed extracts and humic acid. The Premium Organic Line includes the Bridge Products 4-2-0 Topcoat and 3-6-3 Turf Food.

For more information call 800/343-6343 or Circle No. 285

**Howard Johnson's Enterprises** launched its new line of products featuring HJCT-2, a patented coating process for nitrogen and potassium.

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For more information call 800/298-4656 or Circle No. 286

**Lange-Stegmann Co.** offer a variety of products.

The products include Agricoturf II Stabilized Nitrogen, Polyon Polymer Coated Nutrients, Nutralene and Nitroform Nitrogen, as well as Sulfur Coated Urea and Super U. Lange-Stegmann will also be offering fertilizer products with Mach 2 Turf Insecticide Grub control in early 1999.

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**Natural Fertilizer of America** offers biologically-based soil treatments.

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**Nutramax Laboratories, Inc.** offers Macro-Sorb radicular and Macro-Sorb foliar amino acid-based fertilizers and Quelant-Ca calcium chelated with amino acids.

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**Plant Health Care's Flexx** reduces stress, stimulates root growth and corrects nutrient deficiencies.

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**Regal Chemical Co.** offers Multigreen II.

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**Terra Industries** offers a full line of fertilizers.

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**Tessenderlo Kerley** offers the firstTurf family of liquid fertilizers.

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