





# FERTILIZER TRENDS

Getting the most from fertilizer applications goes back to Turf 101 — soil testing, keeping detailed records of what was applied in the past and not over-dosing lawns.

BY CURT HARLER

FOR LAWN CARE operators (LCOs), less might be more in fertilization this year.

“A lot of our focus is on trying to make the product as economical for the LCO as possible,” says Mike Sisti, product marketing manager for Lebanon Turf, Lebanon, PA.

With the price of phosphorous (P) going through the roof, Lebanon Turf’s Zero-P initiative has come front-and-center. But the company also is looking at new nitrogen (N) technologies to meet LCOs’ needs.

“About 90% of our product focuses on Zero-P,” Sisti says. “From an environmental and cost standpoint, it makes sense to apply only what you need. With the costs of P and potassium (K) skyrocketing, this has really hit home. This is an industry-wide promotion.”

Mike Bandy, marketing manager of turf products for The Andersons, Maumee, OH, advises that LCOs rethink their overall fertilizer strategy this season. “Phosphorous should only be used where they need it,” he says. “Potassium can be temporarily reduced, but this strategy will eventually affect turf quality.

“Focus on application accuracy,” Bandy says, stressing accurate calibration. Use spreaders with deflectors to

keep fertilizer from unwanted areas. LCOs also should look for more slow-release and controlled-release fertilizers on the market.

“Some manufacturers have worked hard to improve the durability of the coatings to allow for more predictable, and longer-lasting nitrogen release,” says Bryan Gooch, marketing manager with Agrium Advanced Technologies, Sylacauga, AL.

Bob Bauwens, industry sales manager for Roots Plant Care Group of Novozymes Biologicals, Salem, VA, adds: “Look for improvements in the longevity of materials.” Expect more slow-release and timed-release materials, as well as formulations with dispersible granules, he says. The latter offers minute amounts of product dispersed across the turf with NPK, herbicides and plant stimulants.

“The materials might not be new and innovative, but the way we put them together will give the user better and more effective use,” Bauwens says.

Older sulfur-coated urea technologies still suffer from what is known as catastrophic release, where N might release all at once. Don Myers, product development manager for herbicides and plant growth regulators (PGRs) with Bayer Environmental Science, says his company’s new XCU brand of sulfur-coated technology has a proprietary new coating process that emphasizes durability.

However, Myers says he

expects there will continue to be restrictions on certain materials, and that costs will continue to rise. “We are seeing a downward blip in oil prices ... but if you think it will stay that way, think again,” he says.

## Volatile prices

“Increased demand for food in India and China and fluctuating prices of domestic crops are just two of the factors involved — but if history repeats itself, we may see another run up in prices by the second quarter of 2009,” Gooch says.

Bandy agrees but says, “No one expects a repeat of last year’s major increases.” K should remain fairly strong, he believes, as fertilizer raw material producers are idling capacity to keep the market in balance.

“The good news is we got a wake-up call from the prices of fuel and fertilizer,” Bauwens adds. “It made us rethink how we go to business. But these times will pass; American innovation will get us through them to a new day.”








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## FERTILIZER TRENDS

continued from page 32

Whatever the cost, customers like green lawns. Sisti says Lebanon Turf Stabilized Nitrogen (LSN) is one product that reduces the volatility of nitrogen. Even if the lawn gets no rain for 14 days, the N-value remains. Contrast that to urea, which will volatilize into the atmosphere over two weeks' time.

Lebanon Turf also offers a product called MESA, a methylene urea fertilizer with ammonium sulfate. "MESA gives a longer N release so it slowly feeds the turf over an eight-week span," Sisti says. This means fewer truck-rolls required to fertilize a lawn.

"It also gives a brilliant green color right away," he adds.

Gooch says research shows that increasing the amount of N in a fertilizer blend coming from a slow-release source improves the efficiency of N uptake. "In many cases, you can use less total nitrogen and get equal or better greening, compared to blends with soluble sources of nitrogen," he says.

### Learning opportunities

Bauwens says LCOs are being pressured to reduce the amount of nitrogen and phosphorous put on turf, and the industry needs to learn more about using "nutritional feeds" for turf rather than focusing only on NPK.

LCOs need to do their own research, and not rely solely on university recommendations when it comes to building their lawn care programs, Bauwen advises. "Things are changing so fast that university researchers might not have all of the data they need at hand."

Do trials under your own, local growing conditions, he advises.

"Most landscapers and lawn professionals don't know that there are controlled-release fertilizers that can last for six months with one application," Gooch adds. "This type of fertilizer can be a great choice for a commercial account that is under annual contract." LHM

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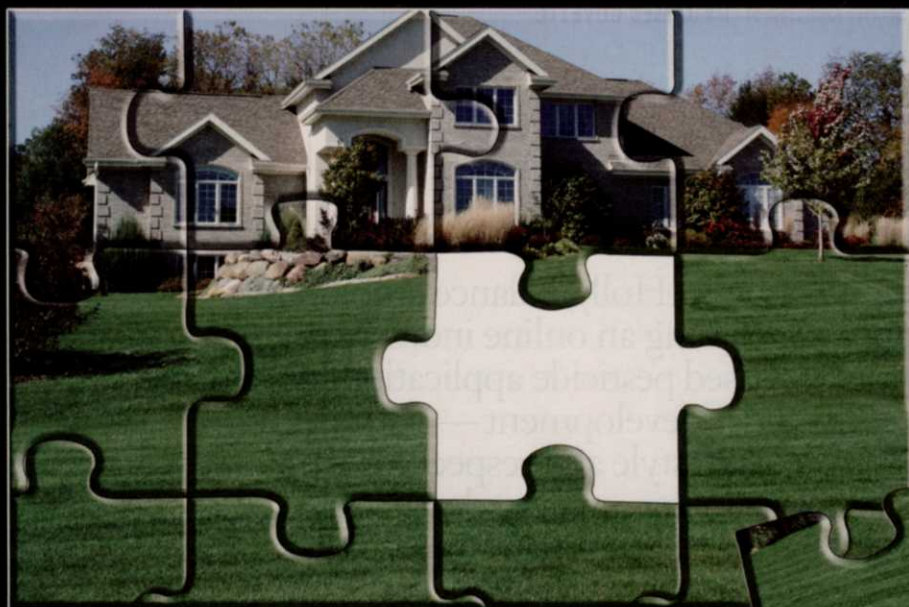
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**Todd Graus** and his wife, Holly, balance ambitious business plans — including an online industry training service and a GPS-based pesticide application monitoring system currently under development — with strong family ties, a spiritual lifestyle and respect for employees. It all takes place at the company's headquarters, a converted ranch house in Jackson, WY.

**What are some of the challenges of running two operations 250 miles apart?**

Even though it's not a franchise, I have my Worland, WY, office running as one. We offer the same services.

Having the two locations (Jackson and Worland, WY) prompted me to develop GreenApplicator.com — a Web site devoted to weekly pesticide training — due to the fact that I was unable to be in two places at the same time. We decided to beef it up and make it available to every company in the U.S. and Canada. At \$10 per user per year, 52 weeks per year, it has become a very inexpensive training tool.

**Detail your Green Applicator training program.**

We assume that when we have a new hire, and that person passes the pesticide applicator exam that he or she will retain the information and continue to learn. That's not always the case. Green Applicator prompts our pesticide applicators — and consumers — to log into a secure Web site, watch a pesticide safety

training video that I teach, and take a 10-question exam. Users are required to log in every week to view the new material, setting up the conditions for continuing education.

**What are some of the practices you have in place to promote a seamless flow of business information?**

During vacations, we transfer calls from one office to the other. We use a browser-based software package that allows both offices access to both customer databases, and because the programs are similar, whoever answers the phone has got things covered. We also have exceptional communication with our clients.

**You're gaining professional property management accounts. How does this segment differ from your typical residential and commercial**

**customers?** Larger accounts mean I work for one client versus 30 customers in the residential market. It also means doing more work with fewer man hours.

**What are the plans for your business for 2009?** God willing, Green Turf Lawnscape will continue to gain market share throughout Wyoming and Idaho. Green Applicator's educational and auction sites will begin to catch fire, and SNIPER Technology (a GPS-based pesticide application monitoring system) will totally revolutionize the worldwide workplace. I partnered with a few friends to develop and bring to the marketplace technology that could eliminate paperwork and save even small companies tens of thousands of dollars per season, while increasing productivity 6% to 10% each day.

## AT A GLANCE

**COMPANY:** Green Turf Lawnscape, Jackson, WY

**FOUNDED:** 1984

**NUMBER OF OUTLETS:** 2 (Jackson, WY; Worland, WY)

**EMPLOYEES:** Six full-time; 16 seasonal

**EDUCATION/CERTIFICATIONS:** Todd Graus holds a bachelor's of science degree in forest management from Colorado State University; he also is an International Society of Arboriculture (ISA)-certified arborist

**INDUSTRY INVOLVEMENT:** ISA; Professional Landcare Network (PLANET); and Professional Lawn Care Association of America (PLCAA) board of directors

**BUSINESS OUTLOOK:** "We're looking at double-digit growth for 2009."

**PERSONAL INTERESTS/HOBBIES:** Coaches youth basketball, plays in over-45 basketball league, and enjoys downhill skiing and boating.

**FAMILY:** Co-owners Todd and Holly; daughters Sydney, 13, Rebekah, 11, and son Gage, 7

**WEB SITE:** GreenTurf.org, GreenApplicator.com, GreenApplicatorAuction.com and SniperTechnology.com

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BY CURT HARLER

MANUFACTURERS KEEP COMING up with cool new concepts. But one constant question in the mower industry is how much “cool” the landscaper can afford. The good news is there is technology out there that has a good payback. Like almost every other industry segment, the higher costs of fuel and steel have put pressure on prices, even for basic units. However, manufacturers are doing their best to keep costs even more under control.

“There is a careful balance all manufacturers have to tread,” says Tim Cromley, sales and marketing manager for

Walker Mowers, Fort Collins, CO. “The technology we put in has to be allowable for what the market will bear. We can do gyroscopes and all sorts of science fiction technology on our mowers — but it has to make sense for the guy writing the check.”

## Fuel-injected

One thing growing in popularity is electronic fuel injection (EFI). Kohler, a major provider of mower power, has made great strides in EFI. Starting with its Command PRO 30 gasoline, twin-cylinder model in March, Kohler

*continued on page 42*

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