

IT JUST HAS TO BE CHEAPER OR BETTER

If not, why make the change?

by ROBERT C. VAVREK, JR.

CONTRARY to popular belief, P. T. Barnum never said, "Another sucker is born every minute." However, he sure had an exceptional talent for hype and marketing. Open any turf management trade magazine and read the advertisements for some of the new turf care products. The exaggerations, half-truths, double-talk, and just plain deception would make Mr. Barnum proud. Notice that the ads having the most outrageous claims are those that rely more on testimonials than hard science to support the product.

It's no surprise to find less hype in the insecticide, fungicide, and herbicide ads. These regulated materials are, as a rule, evaluated using widely accepted scientific procedures at different locations over a period of several years. Some of the research is done in-house by the manufacturer, but new products are usually pitted against current materials and untreated controls in unbiased performance trials at a number of university research sites. Even though efficacy claims are not regulated by the EPA, it should come as no surprise that the efficacy of a particular material is well documented before the familiar name of a major company appears on the label.

Carl Sagen said, "Extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof." Unfortunately, the majority of snake oils, magic potions, and silver bullets never receive anywhere nearly the same scrutiny as pesticides. Too bad, considering the not-so-subliminal message that some of these materials control or suppress disease activity in addition to the many other unsubstantiated claims. Small companies often won't spend money for research, and some university researchers have found it difficult or impossible to obtain certain products for field trials. The favorable data from only a few sampling dates of a single experiment are sometimes given much more credibility than

they deserve. Is this creative marketing or an unethical manipulation of data? You make the call in this gray area.

The less expensive and readily available substitute for unbiased scientific evidence used in marketing an unproven product is the all-too-familiar *testimonial*, and there is no shortage of these in any of the turf trade journals. I have a considerable amount of respect for and value the opinion of many superintendents. However, there are approximately 16,000 superintendents just in the United States, and the testimonial of only one is not always pertinent to the other 15,999. To be honest, there is an advantage to actually using a product on the golf course rather than glean information only from university test plots. Even so, one can easily be misled by the performance of a product in the field in the absence of replication and untreated controls.

Superintendents can, at times, make a relatively good in-house evaluation of a product by covering a small area of turf with plywood prior to treatment. It's not all that bad of a technique if you want to evaluate one, and only one, active ingredient, such as a particular fungicide on a green. New miracle products, though, are sometimes a mixture of several ingredients, including a little urea and/or micronutrients, particularly iron. Separating the fertilizer effect from the effects of the other active ingredients then becomes a more complicated, if not impossible, procedure.

Over the years I have often been accused of being overly critical of turf care products or turf management strategies that have little, if any, scientific evidence to support the manufacturers' extraordinary claims, and I've missed out on my share of hats, pens, and rulers at trade shows. True, I play the devil's advocate regarding unproven products, and I have no doubt that some products actually improve turf quality under certain con-

ditions. The bottom line regarding my recommendations is whether or not marginal improvement in turf quality (if there is any at all) is worth the cost of the product.

Maintain the following attitude when considering turf products that sound too good to be true: Would you try it if you owned the course and had to pay for the product out of your own pocket? Whether or not biostimulants, humates, soil amendments, water polarizers, balancing cations, microbial additives, and other assorted products and techniques actually improve turf quality is one issue. The other issue is whether or not the benefit (if any) justifies the cost.

I see many excellent golf courses each season during Turf Advisory Service visits. The common denominator among the best courses is a superintendent who understands and implements sound turf management principles. Regardless of the operating budget, they cover the bases – careful water management, sensible fertilizer applications, and timely cultivation operations. They pay attention to the turfgrass plant's basic needs: light, air, water, and nutrients. What rubs me the wrong way about the sales techniques for some new products is the underlying assertion that you can't live without them – that is, if you really want to provide a top-notch course. Well, I see numerous top-notch courses that don't use these materials. Before I make a recommendation to substitute a new product for an old product, it has to perform significantly better than the old material or perform just as well and be less expensive. In other words, it needs to be cheaper or better; if not, why make the change?

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