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A less fertile future?

By Margaret Hepp
8/4/2008

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The industry has been through nearly a century of developments in organic fertilizer, from Milorganite to miracle manures. As increasing droughts, water quality issues and turf-scorching temperatures affect modern golf courses, it's more important than ever to cultivate a resilient and nutrient-rich plant. Many superintendents are turning to organic fertilizer.

"We do a combination of both," says Mark Semm, golf course superintendent at Spanish Oaks Golf Course in Bee Cave, Texas. "We're not totally organic. I think both synthetics and organics have a place in the world, as far as we grass growers are concerned."

It's a statement corroborated by superintendents throughout the country: Only a handful of U.S. golf courses are purely organic — between three and 10, according to a recent estimate by Jeff Carlson, CGCS at The Vineyard Golf Club in Edgartown, Mass. But there's a lot of confusion around the concept. Where do you draw the line between what's organic and what isn't?

When The Vineyard began its organic crusade in 1999, it worked with a definition of organic as "derived from plant materials or biological organisms, or mined from natural deposits." While this has provided an acceptable standard for the golf course, the fact is the USDA has no specific standards for organic golf course practices.

What's good for the grass is good for the golf course, it seems, and so Semm is part of the vast majority of superintendents who use an integrated fertilizer program.

On the greens, he's found synthetic fertilizers to be marginally more controlled when it comes to release and fertility. Organic fertilizers can be unpredictable, he says, but he's happy with his Essential-enhanced greens. He uses the same product on the fairways, heavily diluted.

"It'd be 10 grand a month if we used the Essential we use on greens," he says.

All in all, the organic fertilizer he uses is slightly pricier than a synthetic product would be. But it's not a matter of being green or not green, he says.

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"We use products according to how they're made," he says. "Synthetic fertilizer isn't any more green than an organic. Once we put it out on the golf course, that synthetic, if used properly, is just as safe as any organic. There might be some guys out there who say they're totally green from a fertility standpoint, but I think the bigger picture is to ask what's harmful."

Echoing this stance is Joel Jackson, CGCS, executive director of the Florida GCSA. Golf courses in Florida have been directed to follow the Best Management Practices for Enhancing Water Quality on Florida Golf Courses, a manual drafted and approved by a coalition of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and published in Jan. 2007. Some counties in the state prohibit N and P applications on the golf course between June and September.

"It's not scientific, but it looks good," Jackson says. "The fact is nitrogen is nitrogen, and must be in a solution for the plant to take it up, whether it's a manufactured prill or a hand full of cow manure. It's the same for phosphorous. Dump organic fertilizer down the storm drain and it adds N and P to the lakes just the same."

Jackson believes the most efficient nutrient management is frequent but light rates of soluble fertilizers – "spoon feeding." This can be especially beneficial for denser ultradwarf grass varieties.

Al Sproat, golf course superintendent at Falcon Crest Golf Club, uses Save-a-Tree organic lawn fertilizer on the greens in Kuna, Idaho. He first applied the fertilizer last year.

"The greens came out better and greener this spring," Sproat says. "It's working really well for me. I

don't have to worry about the flush growth you get with synthetic fertilizers."

Slow release was also a selling point for Clark Lovett, senior superintendent of the seven golf courses under Baton Rouge Recreation and Parks (La.). He uses chicken manure from Organic Growing Systems on his tees and during grow-ins.

"Organic fertilizer doesn't produce the flush growth of synthetics," says Lovett. "It's more of an even keel."

But the biggest benefit is the microbes in organic fertilizer, he says. Synthetic fertilizers don't provide the microorganisms essential to top-layer thatch breakdown and soil nutrition.

Semm also uses organic products to increase the microbial population beneath the golf course.

"We use amino acids, proteins, sea plant extract – a little of everything," he says. "It's a holistic thing. Some guys believe as long as you're doing what you should be agronomically, there isn't a place for microorganisms. But our soil has a high pH, and we're just trying to stimulate plant growth. It's one thing to have nutrients in the soil. It's another thing to have your plants taking up the nutrients in the soil."

Both Semm and Lovett predict an increase in organic fertilizer use in the future, but Semm thinks few superintendents will go all-organic.

"We're getting by with what we have," he says. "It's hard for some of us to change."

But perhaps superintendents won't have quite so much change to incorporate. Organic fertilizer use is a unique trend – both progressive and regressive.

"If you look around, it's kind of a feather in your cap if you say you use organic fertilizer," Lovett says. "But really, it's going back to the old ways of doing stuff."

It's a waiting game, then – as petroleum prices continue to soar, how high will synthetic fertilizer prices go? Will organic fertilizers stand the test of time? If hundreds of years of agriculture on American soil are any evidence – it seems they already have. GC

Cover photo: Falcon Crest Golf Club in Kuna, Idaho, has just ordered its second 1,000-gallon tank of Save-a-Tree, a non-polluting organic lawn fertilizer applied to the facility's greens. Photo: Joshua Roper

Monday, August 4, 2008

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