

How to Successfully Steward Customers About Plant Health

Lawn and Landscape Professionals Educate Customers on the Meaning of Green

By Cheryl Wolfe

As the focus on environmental awareness continues to sharpen across the country, homeowners can become overwhelmed with the growing selection of lawn and landscape products and programs offered to them. With no etched-in-stone definitions, phrases like organic and biological products, chemical materials, plant health care, integrated pest management (IPM) and the meaning of “green” itself can leave even the most knowledgeable consumer nonplussed and frustrated. Aware of this confusion, industry professionals strive to deliver the appropriate education and training to homeowners, helping them make informed decisions in the care of their lawn, trees and gardens.

“Education: An Important Tool.”

There are a range of factors that drive homeowners’ decisions in selecting products and programs for their yards. The predominant reasons they choose a particular material or system run the gamut from effectiveness, speed and cost to state government regulations, geography and personal philosophies. Lawn and landscape experts recognize and appreciate the weight the homeowner places on each of these elements but also see a real need to provide accurate and current information-particularly in the area of plant health care. Professionals largely share the opinion that education is an important tool for consumers in the maintenance of their property. And while professionals find their customers aren’t always eager students, they remain committed to their role as industry stewards.



“We Have a Responsibility.”

Peter Derwin, executive director of the Washington Association of Landscape Professionals (WALP) says, “Our industry as a whole needs to be the stewards.” Derwin’s belief is prompted by his conclusion that the consumer’s response to chemicals, for the most part, is emotional and not scientifically based. For this reason, Derwin says, “Our industry has the obligation to be more knowledgeable of all products-organic, biological, chemical-and to share that knowledge with the public.” According to Derwin, the industry has a responsibility to show the public what a particular product can deliver; demonstrate how to properly and responsibly use a recommended product; and offer a variety of landscape maintenance options.

Derwin’s association provides Washington-area landscapers with educational resources where they can find the information needed for a consumer’s particular situation. By regularly referring to this instructional support system, landscape professionals can avoid static recommendations and provide tailored solutions for each customer. “We don’t have a generic, rubber-stamp approach to every property,” Derwin says. “The bottom line is we have a responsibility within our industry, and that is to present, whenever possible, as many plant management options as possible to the consumer.”



Meeting its industry responsibility, WALP provides the following educational tools:

- **Northwest Landscape Professional**, a monthly magazine that’s considered to be the voice of the Washington State landscape and irrigation industry for more than 15 years. The publication features articles on WALP programs, industry topics, legislative issues, news and information and can also be found on the association’s website.
- **National Certified Landscape Technician Program**, a hands-on testing program that seeks to recognize proficiency in the landscape workforce and upgrade the status of the landscape professional.
- **National Certified Landscape Technician Program Advanced Endorsement**, a study guide and test for advanced horticultural management.

- **Comprehensive Seminar Schedule for the landscape professional**. A current schedule of events is available on the WALP website.
- **Industry articles**, a series running through 2002 on soil health and other related issues.

Visit the WALP website at www.walp.org for membership and tradeshow information; education on the Green Industry; details on the National Certified Landscape Technician Program; and to link to landscape, irrigation, maintenance, equipment, government, and other Green Industry association and organization websites.

“We Stress a Partnership.”

The Professional Lawn Care Association of America (PLCAA) stresses a partnership between the customer and the lawn care professional, according to Tom Delaney, executive vice president of the association. This “side-by-side” relationship, as it’s called by the PLCAA, encourages the customer to cooperate with—even assist—the lawn care professional whenever possible. This relationship is especially integral in plant health care management, according to Delaney.

Professionals define plant health care management as a preventive approach rather than a curative one in plant care. The reason being is a healthier, stronger plant from the onset can put its own natural defense system to work against pests. Yet, Delaney finds the

majority of his customers define plant health care as simply IPM, a practice which 80 to 90 percent of his customers are using one or more facets. These percentages support Delaney’s belief that “plant health care is really in the customer’s hands.”

Delaney says, “The real basis for plant health care is the education and training of customers. They need to know the right variety of grass to start with and the best location for that particular species. Then when they follow with the right amount of watering and proper mowing techniques, they can avoid a curative approach in their lawn care.” And it’s through a strong partnership, emphasizes the association, that homeowners can receive the appropriate information and then practice it for themselves.

The following tools from the PLCAA can help professionals in the education and training of consumers:

- **ProSource**, a bi-monthly newsletter covering association news and important issues affecting the lawn care industry.
- **Side-By-Side**, a 15-minute video reviewing the basics and benefits of the homeowner working closely with the lawn care professional.
- **A variety of handouts, including:**
 - Water Quality and Your Lawn*, A brochure on improving turf water quality through proper management practices.
 - What You Should Know About Lawn Care Products and Services*, A Q&A on various lawn care products and services.
 - Tips on Choosing a Lawn Care Service*, A piece listing 10 helpful tips for choosing a lawn care service.
 - Pets & Your Lawn*, A common sense guide to lawn care and pet safety.
 - A Professional Cares series*, Informational sheets on environmental topics pertinent to the public.

Professionals and consumers alike can visit the association’s website at www.plcaa.org which presents extensive research abstracts on a variety of turf related topics. This site also takes you to multiple links that feature educational information, including the sites of the International Society of Arboriculture, the National Arborists Association and other Green Industry organizations.



“We Always Present Options.”

With an interest in plant health care since the late '80s, Tim Doppel, president of Atwood LawnCare Inc., is recognized throughout the industry for his interest in, and betterment of, the green movement. The leader of this Sterling Heights, MI lawn care business gives industry meetings and seminars on “low input plant health” and was ranked as one of the nation’s 100 most influential and visible green industry professionals on Landscape Management magazine’s inaugural LM-100 list. But ironically, he heads up a company whose professionals are routinely met with a “no” from homeowners when a natural approach is suggested for the maintenance of their lawns.

Doppel attributes this apathy to the fact that a majority of his customers are “price” conscious not “systems” conscious. “We’ll walk onto a customer’s property and tell him we could use 70 percent less pesticides and 50 percent less fertilizer and it would look the same—it would still look good,” explains Doppel. “We point out it would only cost them a little bit more, but for the most part the customers aren’t interested.”

This disinterest isn’t a recent development, Doppel says. Since his involvement in the green industry, “there’s only been a small incremental increase of interest in the green movement within this region,” Doppel says. “There are pockets within the state that are attuned to the green movement, but overall there is no overriding concern.”

Yet, this doesn’t deter him from consistently presenting three lawn care approaches to every customer. The first is an all-natural approach that uses only organic fertilizer. The second approach is the same as the first but incorporates spot treatments of pesticides. And the third approach is a weed-and-feed treatment. Amazingly, Doppel says, only .2 percent of his customers select one of the first two options. And while this lack of interest in a natural approach doesn’t appear to be waning among homeowners in his region, Doppel is far

from discouraged and continues to be strong in his role as a plant health care steward.

Offerings from Atwood:

Atwood LawnCare offers homeowners regular newsletters that provide seasonal information, guidance, and tips for their lawns.

Both professionals and consumers can check out the Atwood LawnCare website at www.atwoodlawncare.com for lawn care programs, tips and regional weather forecasts. This site will also link you to foundations and professional associations, as well as consumer information and pesticide safety sites.

