

What's in Your Fertilizer?

by Anne Morris

Carefully chosen, quality ingredients can make a substantial difference in how well a product works when applied to your golf course. There is a tendency to assume that all natural products are pretty much the same, producing similar results. However, when you talk to the people who run the companies, you learn that there's more to know about what goes into these products.

Clare Reinbergen, president of Growth Products (www.growthproducts.com), will tell you that careful selection of materials makes her liquid fertilizer products economically practical and environmentally sound. Currently, the White Plains, N.Y., company has national distribution in the United States and sells internationally.

Their scientists are careful about what ingredients they use. "We don't like to use anything with chlorides in it," Reinbergen said. "None of our products have chlorides. We try to keep the salt index very low so that we get good quality products without a lot of garbage in it."

Salts are not the only outcasts. "We don't have a lot of nitrates either," Reinbergen said. "I think there's only one product we make that has nitrates in it, which is kind of a no-no now, because of environmental groundwater pollution. Nitrates are a very big problem."

She is satisfied that her company works hard to avoid anything that could be bad for the environment. "We keep trying," she said, though apparently the struggle is ongoing. "People come to us and say, 'Would you like to buy this?' They want to sell us waste materials. I won't touch anything that is a waste by-product. You don't know what's in them."

Others might argue that this is a good way to make use of waste products, so that the good things they contain

are not discarded, but Reinbergen draws a firm line. She likes full knowledge of ingredients.

Her company has also been approached by people from other countries who offer their unusual raw materials for sale. "Odd things," as Reinbergen put it. She turns many of them down, too. "Unless I know that I can have a good, safe, consistent raw material," she said, "I'm not going to use it."

Trained as a biochemist, she is especially careful with what products her company puts on the market. "I have two granddaughters," she said, "and I think about what life is going to be like for them. That's why, whatever little bit I can do to help the environment, I try to do."

Reinbergen started her company 24 years ago, after hearing about liquid fertilizer and what it could do. "I had been working in plastics, but I wanted to make fertilizers," she said. "I wanted to get involved in growing plants."

The products her company develops tend to be focused on specific needs. In addition to fertilizers, such as Essential Plus and Repair Plus, they have a product called Control De-Thatcher, aimed at the golf course market. It contains several different soil bacteria, since bacteria help break down organic material such as thatch. "Also in it, we actually have enzymes that attack the fiber," Reinbergen said, "and attack different parts of it. These enzymes are strong—certain ones go after sugar; certain ones go after thicker fiber. They're very specific to go after that very durable thatch."

With many golf courses, especially in the southern markets, forced to use effluent water, organic products such as Essential Plus and Repair Plus prove especially helpful. "One of the real problems with using

effluent water is there's usually higher salt in the effluents from however they're processing them," Reinbergen said. "These organics will absorb and neutralize salts. That is a really big plus when the golf course superintendent knows that the water supply is not the best quality. They can counteract a buildup of salt by using these organic materials."


She sees the need for organics as likely to grow. Already, the overseas demand for organic products is strong, and they are well accepted there.

"Well, just look at how the organic food market is growing," Reinbergen said.

Targeted feeding

Another company that strives for quality products, attuned to specific needs, is the Lutz Corporation, based in Oregon, Ill. Founded by Lee Lutz, the company makes slow-release fertilizer spikes that target the specific needs of palm trees.

It's an odd niche, one that Lutz happened into when someone he knew was having trouble keeping the palms growing around his course. These particular palms needed manganese, and he needed a way to give it to them. After considerable research, the Lutz fertilizer spikes were developed.

Critical minor elements supplied by the spikes—in addition to nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium—make the difference in how well trees and shrubs grow. Lutz's literature notes that because of the abundant rain on Florida golf courses, it would take several broadcast feedings to take the place of one Lutz/Spike feeding (www.lutzcorp.com). It's an instance of using the right ingredients and delivering them in an efficient way. 

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