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The truth about bionutrition

Superintendents use bionutrition programs to keep turf green under stress.

ROB THOMAS
May 26, 2011

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Like a carnival barker touting a two-headed woman or a mysterious man with a brown satchel selling magic elixir that promises uncommon results, some things seem too good to be true. Manufacturers and proponents of bio-based nutrition for golf courses have spent the last two decades trying to dispel that myth.

The theory behind bio is delivering to the plant what it wants to make naturally, but cannot, given the extreme stresses placed on it when height of cut is lowered, high temperatures occur, excessive play is experienced, etc.

Though the technology has been around for years, many are just learning of it. Bio-based nutrition - or biostimulants - is the use of naturally-occurring materials that enhance the plant's growth to help it endure environmental stresses. These - chiefly root growth and apical density - are produced by the turf plant in ideal conditions.

Biostimulant products boost the plant's natural defenses against the stresses induced by low height of cut, heat and water stresses, among other things. Research has shown that biostimulants are best used proactively to prepare the turf for imminent stresses as opposed to reactive use.

Jeff Harris, certified golf course superintendent at Kearney Hill Golf Links in Lexington, Ky., has been a believer in bio-based nutrition since first trying it in 1999.

"I have 40 acres of bentgrass, right in the heart of the transition zone, and summers can be very stressful," Harris says. "Initially, I was not sure what to expect. I was not very familiar with most of these products at the time."

Looking for ways to strengthen the bentgrass, he gave bio a whirl.

"I have seen tremendous benefits with the bio products ... very healthy turf, great color, and the turf is more resilient to all the stress of the very hot and humid Kentucky summers," Harris says.

Harris, who referred to the bio products he uses as "essential" to his entire program, also said most of them are "very affordable," too.

"I think the costs are very good, but some of the savings are in using less of other products I used to use," he says. "I have reduced my fairway pythium fungicides to almost zero, which is very impressive in our climate with bentgrass."

Superintendent Patrick Husby of Hamilton Farm Golf Club in Gladstone, N.J. agrees on the cost-benefit, but that's not necessarily the common perception.

"A frequent comment I hear from colleagues who do not use Floratine is that it is 'too expensive' or 'the cost per unit N is too high.' I disagree for a variety of reasons," he says, stressing a 14-product mix on a 7-day spraying schedule isn't needed in order to see the results. "Starting on a small scale will pay immediate

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dividends, and based on soil and tissue tests, additional products could be added for balance.

"Most importantly, what type of cost-benefit analysis could account for knowing that your turf is prepared for the stresses of summer as comprehensively as possible?" Husby says. "We had our most difficult maintenance summer, along with many other courses, in the summer of 2010, and our greens survived and thrived with the nutritional program we deliver."

According to Husby, bionutritional lines provide "excellent color, plant health and plant strength." His 10-plus years of using bio products has shown him his turf is much better prepared to handle the rigors of summer heat, humidity, tournament preparation, low mowing heights and all the other stress factors relating to high level golf course maintenance.

There is not an either/or choice when looking at bio-based nutrition vs. traditional methods, meaning there is no need to "switch." A bio-based nutrition program complements, augments a "traditional" nutrition program. Both work in tandem to strengthen the plant.

Whatever method is chosen, superintendents need the end result to be healthy turf.

"We all know there are many different ways to skin a cat, and finding a sound nutritional program will better prepare you for the tough times we all face in this business," Husby says. "You cannot predict or change the weather, but you can definitely better prepare your turf for whatever gets thrown its way with a sound management program."

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