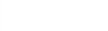
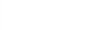
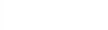
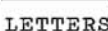
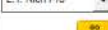
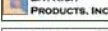
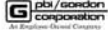
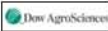




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LAWN CARE: IPM FAQ

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Many landscape contractors view integrated pest management (IPM) as a service option to a traditional lawn care and landscape maintenance programs, but Greg Frank sees it as the way his company does business.

"We've been in business for 50 years and I'd say we've been practicing IPM for 49 of those years," says the vice president of Ted Collins Tree & Landscape, a \$5 million firm headquartered in Victor, N.Y. "We subscribe to total plant health care, and IPM is one of the tools we use."

IPM involves a series of educated evaluations that include setting thresholds, identifying and monitoring pest activity, employing preventive measures and controlling unmanageable pest outbreaks on turf, trees and ornamentals. IPM also requires a strict adherence to sound landscape principles, including using sharp blades when mowing turf, trimming branches with quality pruning sheers, integrating native plants into landscape designs, and properly watering and aerating turfgrass to stay ahead of opportunistic organisms. "We look to make the plant strong and healthy through practices such as proper mulching, pruning and maintaining nutrient levels," Frank says. "By making a plant strong we do very little spraying. However, sometimes we do need a more aggressive approach."

IPM can be a profitable service venture, with many landscape contractors marketing it as a premium service, somewhere in between a traditional program and a purely organic approach. As a result, many report profit margins of 40 percent or higher for their IPM service. But, as with any landscape service, IPM comes with advantages and challenges.

Lawn & Landscape examines some of the most common questions contractors face about their IPM programs and provides some perspective on why IPM may be a viable option for turf, tree and ornamental care.

Q. So you'll be on site more, doing less and not spraying? Yes, contractors practicing IPM are on site more, as many as two to three additional visits per season, depending on environmental conditions and pest stresses. But the contractor is doing more than just walking the property. In a successful IPM program, the contractor must examine the overall health of the turf, trees and ornamental plants on a client's property. That inspection includes an assessment of weed infiltration and signs of pest and insect damage, as well as any other precursors to larger plant problems.

"Those contractors who practice IPM at a high level are very good biologists," says Chuck Silcox, global product development manager, turf and ornamentals at DuPont Professional Products in Wilmington, Del. "They have a real knowledge of the plant species present on a property and the pests that frequently attack them."

Depending on the client's threshold levels – or the point when a pest infestation needs to be addressed or risk the overall health of the turf or plant – a contractor may take no action.

This perceived "lack of doing anything" is an educational issue and a shift in cultural practices that IPM contractors must overcome when introducing their program to clients. Complete Landscaping Service has successfully offered IPM to its clients in the Bowie, Md. market for nearly 30 years. Initially, though, its IPM program got off to a rocky start, says Susan Wallis, the company's vice president, because clients don't fully appreciate that IPM is a detail-oriented process. "Clients were accustomed to receiving blanket applications," she says. "They felt they weren't getting enough bang for their buck."

"Communication and education has eliminated those concerns and people have really gotten on board with the value of preserving green space," Wallis adds.

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"Communication and education has eliminated those concerns and people have really gotten on board with the value of preserving green space," Wallis adds.

In fact, Michael Cioffi, the IPM manager for Allendale, N.J.-based Borst Landscape, says his biggest detractors are his clients' neighbors. "We field a lot of calls, mostly from new clients, who say their neighbor saw our truck in front of their yard, watched the technician walk the property and that they didn't see him do anything," he says.

Action with a traditional synthetic pesticide is a decision for the contractor and the client. For example, Phyllis Hodge, president of PH Lawn Care in Gloucester, Mass., says her clients' preferences with IPM run the gamut of available options. Some request a program that utilizes only organic methods, such as soaps and oils, while other clients prefer synthetic pesticide products and others want no chemicals used whatsoever.

"We make recommendations, but it's the client's decision as to what type of pest-control products, if any, we'll use," Hodge says. "It's our duty, though, to educate the client on the outcome of whatever course of action they choose to pursue, whether it's chemical or nothing at all."

Q. What's my threshold? It's unnecessary to eradicate every weed and insect pest from a landscape. Instead, contractors work closely with clients to establish threshold levels, says Kyle Miller, senior technical specialist with BASF Tree and Ornamental Products, based at Research Triangle Park, N.C. Establishing these parameters requires a frank conversation between contractor and client about what they can expect with various threshold levels.

"It's in the eye of the beholder and it reflects what the client's expectations for how the property will look," Miller says. "Let's say it's a commercial property. At what point or tolerance level will a pest or disease impact how people view his business? He may not need the property to be super-duper perfect, just a healthy landscape."

For example, if a client chooses a 15 percent threshold then a pest has to exceed 15 percent infestation of an area of turf or other plant material before reactive measures are taken. Those measures may include a simple pruning of the infested area or as involved as using a narrow-spectrum pesticide to control a grub outbreak.

However, with IPM, treatment never completely eradicates a pest. "Most of our clients ask about pest control vs. eradication," Wallis says. "Many people think when we treat for an insect or a disease, it means we completely remove the pest or disease from their environment. That's not the case."

Promising 100 percent control is an impossible expectation and goes against basic IPM principles of monitoring and control. "If someone wants zero bugs or zero damage, then we don't take them on as customers," Frank says.

Q. If you don't find anything will I still get charged? The challenge in marketing and selling IPM is to extract value from this service in the marketplace, contractors say. Often, clients have a difficult time finding value in the type of expertise an IPM program offers.

Frank begins the education process at the first client meeting. From that moment on he exposes clients with information on what's happening on their property. "If we supply the client with good information then we have very few problems with them questioning our IPM program," he says.

IPM programs tend to be more expensive than traditional programs. Much of that added cost stems from the increase in visits to the client's site, an increase from five visits for a traditional chemical program to seven and as many as 12 visits throughout the season, contractors say. Frequency depends upon outbreaks and particular pest problems on the site.

"If a property has numerous plants that succumb to damage by pests, then they typically will require more visits and more monitoring," Wallis says. "So our IPM pricing is based on the estimated time required for a site inspection to be performed and an average treatment of 25 percent of the plant material on site. IPM is more labor intensive than turf services and requires specialized training, therefore it commands a higher price."

Frank bases his IPM pricing on visiting a property at a minimum of once every four weeks. Prices are on a square-foot basis, but he takes into account the square footage of not only the landscape surface area – turf and beds – but also the square footage of the plants according to their volume. Prices are adjusted accordingly for ancillary IPM services such as mulching, fertilization and soil testing, he says.

Q. are you going to use pesticides? Sometimes the classical definition of IPM is misconstrued to mean no pesticides, Silcox says. "But pesticides have always been part of IPM," he says.

Pesticides have a synergy with IPM because IPM requires identifying problems before taking action, says Mark Urbanowski, senior product manager at Dow AgroSciences in Indianapolis. "To me that's fundamental IPM philosophy," he says. "Look at what the issues are holistically and determine whether a pest is really an issue. Let's look at the other environmental factors before I need to use a tool like a synthetic chemical."

Often a pesticide is required to either prevent a pest from taking hold, or to stem back its advance, and the question whether to treat preventively or curatively depends on the pest. "You need to think about whether you can successfully choose a product that will control the pest that is exceeding threshold levels," Silcox says. "At the same time, you need to choose a material that will have minimal impact to those beneficial organisms. To me, that's an IPM approach."

In some scenarios taking a preventive measure is a better alternative than a curative approach, says Urbanowski. "For example, to control crabgrass reactively is a far greater effort with the use of chemistry and requires a far more intensive program than if the contractor uses a preemergent to keep the weed from competing with the client's turf," he says. "With crabgrass there will always be a seed reserve that will be back the next year."

It's no different when applying IPM to tree and ornamental care, Miller says. "If your region has a history of particular pest problems, for example if your client's roses get black spot, then you will need to take preventive measures to treat the problem effectively," he says. "Or if your shrubs or other ornamental plants have recurring problems with Japanese beetles, then they will need a preventive treatment to avoid severe damage."

Compared to turf, there is more opportunity to be reactive when treating trees and ornamental plants, Miller says. "If you notice the leaves are getting chewed up you can step back and ask yourself what's the problem here, how can I stop the damage and what tools do I have at my disposal to stop the pests," he says.

A pesticide is just another IPM tool, no different than a hand pruner, Cioffi says. "And if you use a tool properly in IPM the plant material will benefit from it," he says. LL