

Believing is Seeing

Organics are changing minds

by Anne Morris

There's no salesperson quite like one who believes – truly believes – in the company's products. Sometimes, you run into more than one such person.

Gary Grandstaff was a skeptical superintendent with a new degree in agronomy when Dick Psolla first advised him to use molasses on his course to increase microbial activity. That was 20 years ago. Grandstaff resisted for a long time, though the West Virginia superintendent thought Psolla had other good ideas about improving the soil.

About 10 years ago, Grandstaff finally agreed to try molasses. (“Just to get Dick to shut up”, Gary’s wife Shirley recalls. “He said, “All right, I’ll try it!”) After trying different molasses brands and combining them with various nutrients to spray on the course, Grandstaff discovered a considerable difference. Eventually, he founded a company called From the Ground Up to market the molasses products that worked so well for him. His wife works with him in the company.

“Basically, what it does is to increase the microbial activity in the soil,” Shirley said, “which then feeds off the root matter, the thatch matter, and, thus, reduces the problem of thatch on the golf course. Gary’s been using it now at the Pete Dye Golf Club in Clarksburg, W.Va., going on 10 years.” One result, she said, is that the course has no thatch on it. “It’s a quarter of an inch or less.” For the past five years, they have been able to cut out fall aerification of the fairways entirely.

The products are also biodegradable and environmentally friendly – basically organic. “There’s nothing in our products that you can’t go to a vitamin store and get in tablet form for humans to take,” Shirley said.

Over time, she explained, the microbes tend to balance the nutrients in the soil. “Gary has cut his fertilizing by 70 percent. The microbes, in essence, are creating their own humus layer, an organic layer that’s feeding the grass so you don’t need to fertilize.” After talking with Shirley, we caught up with Gary and asked him to explain again how the molasses work.

“Well, first of all, we’re not a liquid fertilizer product or anything,” he said. “We simply

supply a food source and an energy source to increase microbial activity. What happens is [that] the microbes – the fungi, the bacteria and the algae – in the soil take up the molasses blend. As their populations increase, then they start to feed on the organic matter. They’re kind of lazy in a way. They start with the slow-release fertilizer, because they’re easier to digest than the organic matter. Then, once they start on the organic matter, all the nutrients that they’ve picked up are returned back to the soil.” It’s all part of a system that using these products regularly will encourage.

Gary celebrates it as “the simplest technology out there to get Mother Nature working at an optimum.” He’s become a believer, but having started out as a skeptic, he understands why some superintendents may be reluctant to try his products. “You get caught up on that treadmill of regularly applying certain chemical products,” he says, “and it’s very difficult to get off. It takes a unique individual to try a different approach.”

To learn more about From the Ground Up and its products for turf, check out the Web site at www.i-mol.net. Yes, that “mol” stands for molasses. After beginning nine years ago with I-MOL, the company sells a line of products. Among them are M-MOL, C-MOL, K-MOL, I-MOL Plus, I-MOL Plus2 and MICRO-MOL.