



In defense of turfgrass

Apr 9, 2009
By: Ron Hall
Athletic Turf News



Defending plant material is not something I've done before, not in the 25 years I've been a part of this great Green Industry. But I think it's time someone (like me) spoke out about the overblown criticism directed at the most important landscape plant in North America -- turfgrass.

Turfgrass, it seems, is becoming the whipping boy of American landscapes and grounds by a small but growing and increasingly vocal group of critics. Some of these critics come from the environmental community, some from governmental agencies and some from the synthetic turf industry. Admittedly, finger pointing is warranted, but, in my opinion, it's pointed in the wrong direction.

Turfgrass, the foundation of our landscape/lawn service/sports turf industry -- an industry that's worth billions of dollars to the U.S. economy and provides our society with lifestyle and recreational benefits unimaginable even 50 years ago and which is the envy to much of the rest of the world -- is not the problem; the problem is how and where turfgrass is used and how it's managed.

This is no small matter. Consider how big a part turfgrass plays in our lives.

In 2005, Christina Milesi, Ph.D., at the time a NASA researcher, used satellite images to calculate the lawn areas of 13 major metro areas and other data to report that lawns cover an estimated 32 million acres in the United States, about 2 percent of the U.S. landmass.

"This means lawns — including residential and commercial lawns, golf courses, etc. — could be considered the single largest irrigated crop in America in terms of surface area," she reported. She also reported that lawns (including golf courses, parks, etc.) account for about 5 percent of the carbon dioxide absorbed by plants.

OK, let's list some of the most common criticisms directed at turfgrass.

Water agencies in regions facing fresh water availability issues often describe turfgrass as a "water waster" and, in some instances, a "water hog." Activists decry the use of synthetic fertilizers and manufactured pesticides to keep it green and growing, products they tar with the black brush of pollution or worse, hazards to human and pet health, even though these health claims are debatable and, until solid evidence suggests otherwise, seem to be based more on emotion and anecdote than on science.

As if that weren't enough, synthetic turf suppliers have stepped into the anti-turfgrass parade. As some of them extol the environmental benefits of their products, they make it a point to emphasize that their products, unlike turfgrass, don't need "dangerous" pesticides and they do not "waste water." This is marketing bunk, of course.

Now, let's try to assign blame, assuming there is blame, where it rightly belongs.

Admittedly, the overuse and misuse of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides on turfgrass is a problem that needs to be addressed, but mostly and especially at the homeowner level. That's where most of the product is sold, and that's where most of the educational effort needs to be directed. I have much

less concern with the use of chemical products by trained, professional turf managers.

And yes, turfgrass, in some regions of the country, does require frequent irrigation to stay green and alive, and the availability and cost of fresh water for irrigation is a serious issue. That has led water authorities to offer property owners financial incentives to install more water efficient landscapes and, in some cases, to remove turfgrass in favor of synthetic turf or native/regionally adapted plants. In their role as stewards, water agencies do what they deem is necessary to conserve and protect fresh water supplies. That's their job, and they do have a valid point in that, what's the use of having large areas of turfgrass on a property in a water-scarce region of the country, when the only time you're on the turfgrass is to mow it? As one water conservation said — "How is that any different than having a swimming pool that you never swim in?"

The reality, however, is that turfgrasses don't waste water, people waste water. They do this by irrigating inefficiently, by watering with poorly designed or maintained systems, and many of the systems are set to run automatically, rain or shine, and without taking into account climatic or seasonal conditions.

They often compound the problem by selecting and installing turfgrass where other landscape plants would be more appropriate, or insisting upon species or varieties of turfgrass that aren't suitable for their particular regions. They don't realize that decades of breeding work have resulted in the development of species of turfgrass that remain healthy even with low water use or during a drought even though they go dormant and off color.

You're probably getting the drift of my message by now, right? The problem isn't the turfgrass, it's the desire of many property owners to have lawns that look like Augusta National — green year-round, even in hot, dry mid-summer, and without any evidence of weeds, insect pests or clippings. That's unrealistic and not a wise use of resources.

Most certainly, there are issues with the way turfgrass is used and how it's managed, and that needs to be addressed, hopefully by education and not regulation. That's where the work needs to be done.

The criticism doesn't lie with turfgrass, which provides all of us with enormous environmental, societal and recreational benefits, but with its mismanagement.