

THE COST OF USING INTEGRATED PEST MANAGEMENT FOR LANDSCAPE MAINTENANCE COMPANIES

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Introducing Integrated Pest Management in a landscape maintenance operation is a bold move: it requires more technical knowledge, support from the members, different equipment and switching from long-residual to short-residual pesticides.

However, using IPM also offers rewards: the satisfaction of doing quality work, delivering results, and the ability to deliver a landscape setting of high quality.

Since 1994, CropHealth Advising & Research is helping maintenance and spray companies make the transition from traditional pest control to an IPM approach. From our experience, the cost and benefits of the transition process can be described as follows.

I. THE COST OF USING IPM

1- The company must develop a start-up program.

Using traditional pest management means spraying the plants and hoping it will work. Using IPM requires more technical knowledge and the ability to evaluate results. Each company going into IPM must first establish the type of program it will offer.

Start small. Initiate the program in a few, selected accounts to test the procedures, then expand to more accounts when the process is understood.

Have a landscape plan for each site. The inventory of plants found on each site should be part of the client’s file to identify genus more prone to serious pest problems.

Prepare a calendar of seasonal pest problems. Pests that kill plants or seriously affect their appearance must be known to allow good timing of pest management activities.

Offer training to the employees. They must be able to identify the plants they see and understand how the company will approach different pest problems.

2- The company must invest in new equipment.

Traditional pest management requires one large spray tank mounted on a truck and an invoice book. Using IPM requires more spraying flexibility and the ability to treat problems in a timely fashion. Companies using IPM must switch rapidly from one pesticide to another.

Have smaller spray tanks. Spray companies should have two or three tanks on each truck, whereas maintenance companies should have back-pack sprayers for spot treatments.

Carry diagnostic tools. Hand-held lenses of 16-magnification, a pocket knife, clean and sharp pruning shears all come handy for on-site identification of pests or plant problems.

Be on site more often. Visits should be every 3 to 4 weeks to catch developing problems, and no program can be successful with visits every 6 to 8 weeks.

3- The company must plan for longer and more frequent site visits.

With traditional pest management, you walk on the site, you spray the plants, you walk out. With IPM, the pest problems must first be found and identified to justify a treatment. Companies using IPM must design an inspection procedure that is rapid and accurate.

Be on site longer. A typical city residential lot can be inspected and treated in 20 to 30 minutes, twice the time needed for traditional “walk-on and spray” pest management.

Write a short report. Customers interested in IPM enjoy receiving information about the work that was performed, what they can do to help, and what future work will be required.

Develop the confidence to walk away. Not all plants need to be treated all the time, and often the best treatment is to walk away and inspect again later.

4- The company must develop new services.

Traditional pest management is about spraying plants. With IPM, many pest problems are seen as a symptom of a deeper problem that must be addressed for a long-term solution. Companies using IPM offer extra services for their clients.

Switch to low-toxicity pesticides. Products such as *B.t.* or insecticidal soap are less harmful to humans, but also have specific targets, short residual life or are more expensive.

Work on the needs of the plant. The real problem may be a soil imbalance, a lack of fertilization, an overgrown plant needing pruning, or a general lack of vigour.

Connect with experts in your area. Diagnosis of unusual problems is one of the most difficult tasks and it helps to have contacts with government or university researchers.

II. THE BENEFITS OF USING IPM

Companies that are using Integrated Pest Management are more successful in their pest management efforts, but they also get other unexpected benefits.

The customers are very supportive. Home-owners enjoy an approach they associate to “preventative medicine” and prefer to have the plants not sprayed unless there is a reason.

The employees are very supportive. They gain confidence through the training sessions and would rather fertilize a plant than spray it.

There are fewer “calls”. The success of an IPM program is measured by a reduction in the number of “calls”, or customers calling back after a visit, saying there is still a problem.

The pesticide use goes down. There is often more spraying in the first season to clean-up pest problems, but afterwards spraying falls to between 30 and 50% of previous use.

The company can target the high-money market. Horticulture knowledge, multiple services and results are attractive to sophisticated customers willing to pay an extra charge.

CONCLUSION

Pest management is about preventing or solving pest problems, and Integrated Pest Management is one effective method to tackle pest problems in a landscape setting. For an IPM program to be successful, there must be a solid commitment from the company to make it work, and the program must be results-oriented for the customer to support it.