

Era of the Post Patent

Growing Number of Turf Managers, Landscapers Examine Pros of Generics, Sift Through Myths

Provided By: Quali-Pro
Raleigh, North Carolina

In the field of medicine, the word “generic” is as common today as the word “aspirin” was in the 1950s. Generic has also become a common term in the turf management and landscaping industries. But currently there is confusion regarding chemical generic formulations and their viability as useful tools to combat weeds, disease and insects, and regulate turf growth.

Product life cycles have a rich history in this country. Remember encyclopedias? Turf management and landscaping experts say the same is holding true with branded herbicide chemistries, which are being rapidly replaced by high-quality, post-patent chemistries. Because of this, consumers are asking themselves why they should choose an expensive brand when a quality generic works just fine. However, before making a decision, they should take an attentive look at generics in order to determine which are right for them.

First, explore the terminology — generics, post patents, off patents, alternative brands, private labels, house brands and brown boxes, says Doug Suttor, Midwest territory sales manager for Quali-Pro, a premier manufacturer and supplier of post-patent chemicals for the turf and ornamental markets. Typically, each of these terms describes a product that has become available to be formulated and produced by those other than the original patent holder. The chemical is usually produced by a competitive company, but it may also be manufactured by the original patent holder to compete with other generics.

It's been said that generics do not hold up to scrutiny on qualitative differences. Suttor says that may have been true at one time, such as the days when Chlorothalonil 90 DF was carried under the brand names Thalonil and Echo. The generic was formulated on a clay granule and had a large grind size as the original Daconil. Since disease control with a contact fungicide was a function of leaf coverage, the material didn't control dollar spot as well as the newer Ultrex that was rushed to market in response to Chlorothalonil going off patent. But today, he says, most good generic formulations are pan-granulated and within the specified micron size range for optimal control.

So how are generics good for the industry? Suttor says generics push the original patent holder to improve formulations and innovate.

“Prices have been kept in check for the staples like Propiconazole, Chlorothalonil, Thiophanate-methyl, Trinexipac-ethyl and Iprodione, keeping those in the turf management and ornamental industries ahead of their budgets. But some generic formulations are better than the original, with some of the benefits being easier mixing, less nozzle clogging and less foaming” he says. “It makes sense considering formulation technology has made significant advancements in the last 20 years.

“So with equal or better control than the original registrant at palatable prices, more turf and ornamental managers are taking a closer look at generics,” Suttor adds.

Secondly, turf and ornamental managers must be able to separate fact from fiction. Suttor says one myth that still gets perpetrated is the idea that synthesis companies will not have the money to produce more new chemistries if customers purchase generics. “Synthesis companies slowed new chemistry research years ago. It was, in part, due to the advent of gene modification seed technology within the agricultural sector,” he says. “The synthesis companies like Monsanto, Syngenta and Bayer found it much more profitable to put their budgets behind genetically modified organisms than chemistries.” Suttor adds that it’s costly and difficult to screen for something significantly better than the current stable of products.

What are the big research and development (R&D) companies up to now? With fewer new products to choose from, Suttor says, many are going back through their agricultural chemistries to see if they have any niches in turf and ornamentals. Other strategies include going through “shelved products” — materials that may have a selective fit in a narrow market, but weren’t considered the first choice to market. Trinity is a good example of this. Another strategy that R&D companies are exercising is to purchase new compounds from small boutique synthesis companies abroad, Suttor says. “Countries like Japan and Korea have very good synthesis capabilities, but no marketing force. So they find a good marketing and development partner,” he says. Lastly, experts are noticing that combination strategies of pre-packaged tank mixes like Instrada and Tartan are on the rise. Recent research from Purdue and Georgia show that fungicide combinations give an additive, but not synergistic effect. “Combinations are convenient but pricey alternatives to tank mixes. They may reduce a super’s flexibility with rates. Combinations seem to be built for the company formulating them, not for turf managers and landscapers,” Suttor says. “They are mainly defensive marketing efforts to hold off generics by guarantying that as many of their products go into the tank and not mixed with generics.”

Suttor has discovered that some of the new chemistries being introduced have only marginal increases in efficacy, but with a much higher cost than a comparable generic. He says this is especially true with demethylation inhibitor (DMI) fungicides. "The field has become crowded with new products. Do they really control disease significantly better than the industry-standard Propiconazole that is 70 percent the cost of what it used to be"? Suttor asks. "It seems ridiculous to ask \$50 more per acre for a new DMI for only marginally better control." He says customers should ask themselves if the added cost justifies the end result.

Another myth consumers often hear is that generic manufacturers don't stand behind their products. "These days the generic players have to stand behind their materials like everyone else, in some cases, better because they have more to prove to the market. "They have to try harder," he says. "Plus, most of the people employed by generic companies have had long and successful careers with companies like Dow, BASF, Valent Syngenta or Bayer. These folks know the drill."

So how do customers know if the generic or house brand they are considering is up to the test for their operation? To help answer this question, Suttor says they can seek out more information about the product by going directly to the source — the manufacturer. He says reputable generic manufacturers have Web sites and adequate field representation. "They also have University Data to back up control claims, which means it's likely a good material," he says.

But the best test is for customers to demo the product themselves. "Discuss it with your distributor representative to find out which products and formulations seem viable for you. Talk with other people in your industry who have used generics in your area and ask if they've been happy with the results," Suttor says. "The key is not to rely on one source to tell you the truth."

There was a time when turf managers and landscapers had adequate budgets and money wasn't an issue. But these days, every penny counts. Suttor says that's why an increasing number of consumers are taking a closer look at adding generic chemicals to their arsenal. And with the proper research, and by asking the right questions, they can determine which products are right for their operation.

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