

Environmental awareness among groundsmen has led to a shift in demand towards natural fertilisers

PRESSURE TO THINK GREEN WHEN IT COMES to specifying commodities in the face of Agenda 21, and the general availability of more-consistent, better-quality and better-performing products, continue to fuel the demand for organic fertilisers.

"Everyone is under pressure to be more environmentally conscious – from greenkeepers and groundsmen through to landscapers and, especially, those in the local-government sector," says commercial development manager Clive Williams of Vitax. "Developments in the market are being driven by end-user demand."

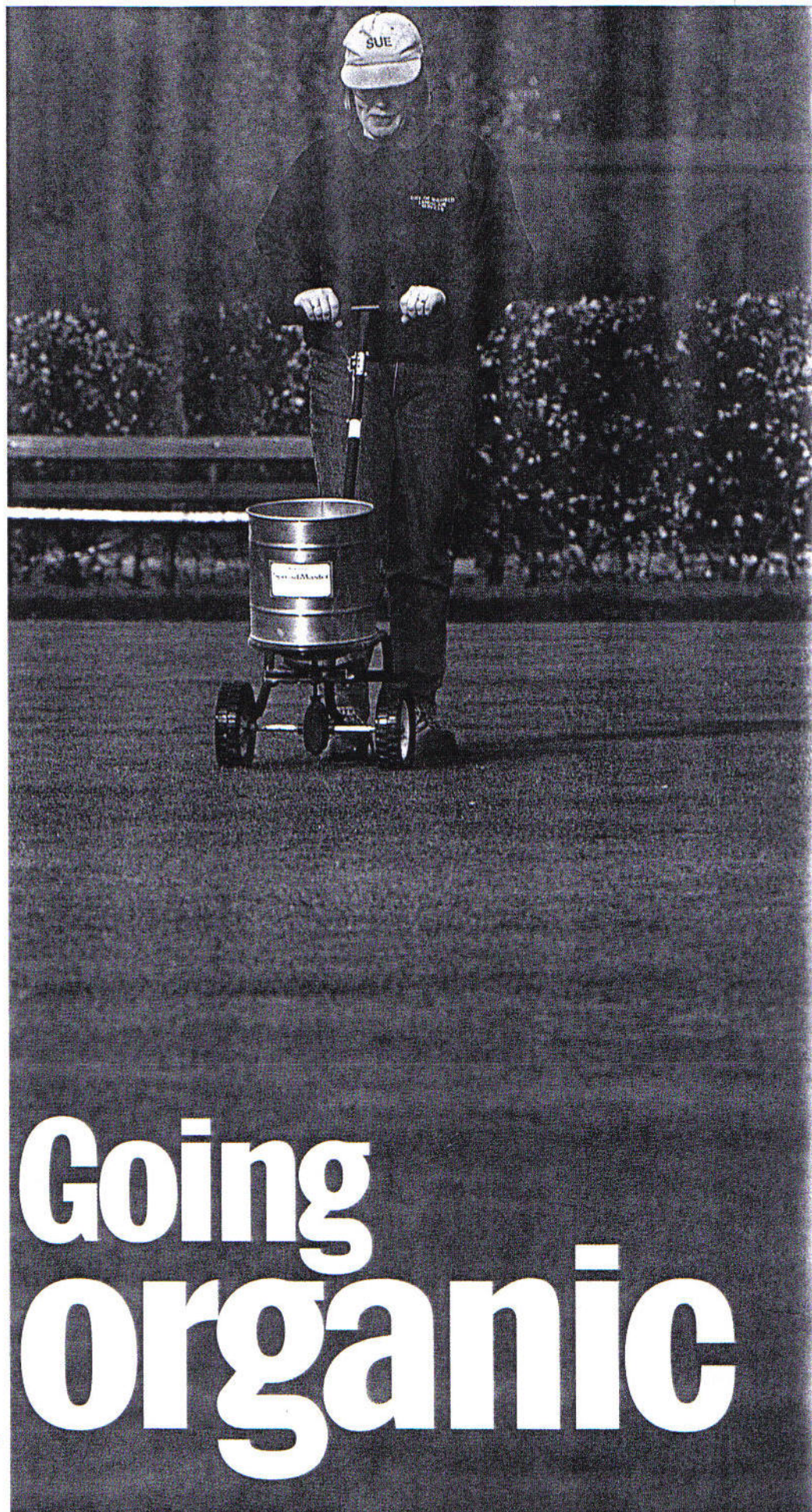
Marketing and development manager John Riggall at Amenity Land Services, Shropshire, agrees: "There is tremendous interest in organic fertilisers and more natural products. Local authorities in particular are much more aware of the environmental arguments, and are taking Agenda 21 into account when designing programmes and specifying products."

Early attempts 10 or 15 years ago to market organic fertilisers in the amenity sector were largely unsuccessful, because of problems of free nitrogen and unpleasant smells.

Over the past few years, however, better materials, production methods and pricing have made organics attractive to a new generation of greenkeepers, groundsmen and landscapers. The market has taken off, with new products being launched at the major shows, with the best possibly still to come.

"The products we have now are the forerunners of what we view as being even better materials," says Williams, who admits Vitax is currently undertaking extensive trials of new products – some of which are reportedly showing significant benefits. ▷

Millhouses Park, Sheffield: a Symbio programme has improved the bowling greens



Going organic

◁ In terms of fertilisers, we are seeing a demand for organic products for use after coring in the spring, when the composted manures can also stimulate microbial activity in the soil. Launched at the Harrogate BTME turf exhibition in January, Vitax's Vitaliser (3.2-5.0-2.5) is 100-per-cent organic – naturally releasing its nutrients slowly – and has been developed to encourage new growth by gentle persuasion. In addition, though it is recommended for year-round use, Williams says it comes into its own before spring sowings.

"Vitaliser has naturally occurring trace elements combined with a balance of both quick- and slow-acting nitrogen, which means that the product avoids rapid leaching of nutrients during heavy spring rains, and nurtures the young shoots of an emerging sward, rather than encouraging flushes of growth," he

Other new products

From Scotts UK Professional: Greenmaster range of four concentrated liquid fertilisers (High N 23-0-0, NK 11-0-11, Spring/Summer 14-3-10 and Autumn 8-4-16), for use individually or in combination, to achieve precision in turf response. Available in 10-litre packs, each treating up to 3,600m².

From Rigby Taylor: two mini-granulars (25-5-18 and 15-0-30) have been added to the Polymax range of turf fertiliser. Granule size is less than 0.2cm, with two types of nitrogen providing a fast- and slow-release source – the release being governed by temperature, and being unaffected by pH or microbial activity. One application (20–35g/m²) is said to last five to six months.

From GreenLink International: TurfVigor, an addition to the Green-Release range, contains beneficial microbes, key organic nutrients, micronutrients, soluble humic acid and marine-kelp extracts.

From Avoncrop Amenity Products: Surf to Turf range of liquid seaweed feeds and Surf to Turf 100-per-cent composted-seaweed soil improver for turf and ornamental beds.

From Alpha Amenity Marketing: Pentagon Prestige fertiliser range: five formulations for fine turf; three for outfield turf; four liquid fertilisers; and two specialities – Planter (4-19-10 + 7.5 per cent magnesium) for trees and shrubs, and Green Response liquid iron for rapid green-up of turf.

explains. "It will give many weeks of gradual release of nutrients. It is soft and gentle."

Also launched at BTME, the Greentec range of granular fertilisers from Headland Amenity gives greenkeepers and groundsmen the choice to go organic – or not. In both instances, the 0.125cm granules are homogeneous, all the nutrients being present in each and every granule for an even and consistent response.

"A lot of organic fertilisers are blends, but this one is homogenous to give an even coverage of nutrients," says Headland Amenity's managing director Mark De Ath.

Conventional Greentec fertilisers use combinations of up to four different nitrogen sources. There are three formulations for spring/summer application and one for use in the autumn/winter or early season.

The two new organic fertilisers comprise fully organic composted material (cow manure and pine bark, with sugar-beet pulp for the potassium source and dolomite limestone) in combination with added nitrogen, phosphate, potash and magnesium. The granules are low in odour, free-flowing and, according to De Ath, lend themselves to application through both rotary and drop spreaders. The two formulations are 5-5-5 and 10-0-6.

"The balanced NPK feed has half the nitrogen in ammoniacal form, providing good response during cool conditions and magnesium to improve colour, while the zero-phosphate formulation is designed for use on rootzones where soil phosphorus levels are acceptable," says De Ath.

Headland Amenity has also added two new items to its Seamac seaweed product range. For ease of handling and cost-effective application, Seamac Ultra is a concentrated liquid designed for use on fine and coarse turf. It is totally organic, and contains 30 per cent seaweed solid. Recommended rates are five litres per hectare in 200–400 litres of water.

The second new product is Seamac XL. This combines seaweed extract with a wetter for

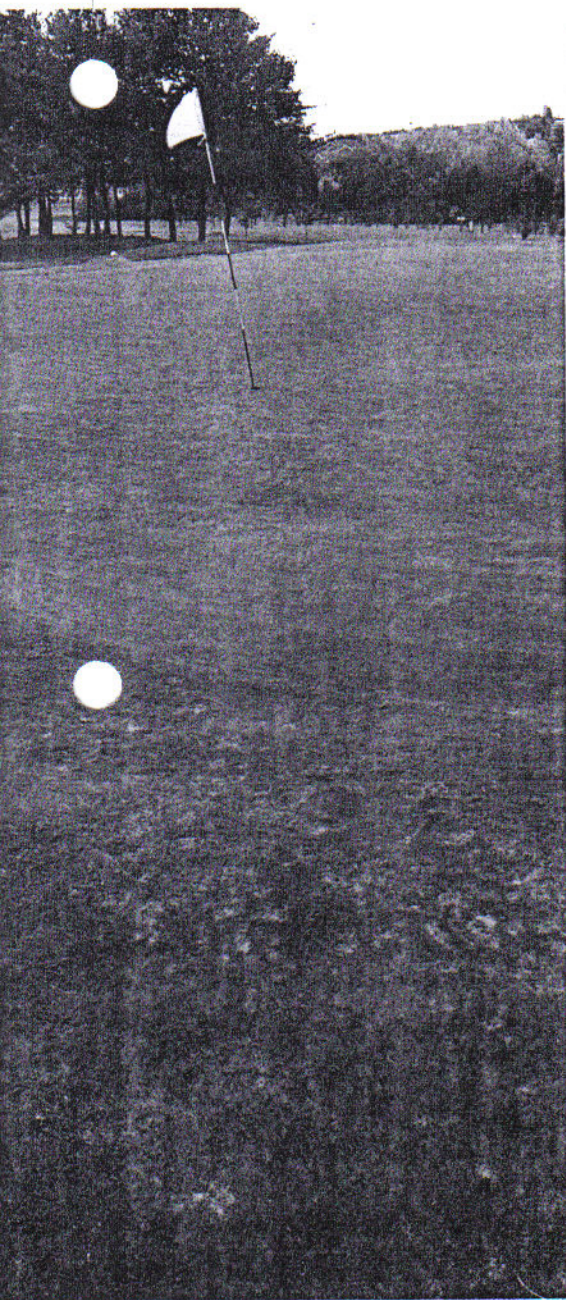
year-round use on all turf areas, and is said to help control dew for up to seven days after application, as well as increase nutrition to the plant.

Along with organic fertilisers, there is excitement – especially in the turf industry – about mycorrhizal fungi and beneficial bacteria. Good results have been reported in many instances, like at Millhouses Park, Sheffield, where a Symbio programme is turning the bowling greens from a slimy mess of squelchy thatch, disease and *Poa annua* into well-draining, playable greens with no *Fusarium*.

Now, a nutrient feed and beneficial microbes have been combined. ALS reports that its range of Natural Solutions Bio-Organic soil conditioners and fertilisers has met with good response from greenkeepers and groundsmen. The range of products, inoculated with plant-beneficial bacterial and fungi, has been expanded to include a new formulation, which claims to significantly increase biological resistance to fungal attack in soil. ALS Premier Micro-Life 4-3-2 is a fertiliser containing 60 per cent organic matter that is inoculated with predatory fungi. It can be used in turf after hollow tining, coring or slitting, and is said to inhibit infection by *Fusarium*, *Pythium*, *Rhizoctonia*, dollar spot and red thread. It can also be used during tree-planting, and in new landscape plantings where reclaimed topsoil is likely to be a problem.

"Our system works by using organic fertiliser and soil ameliorants which foster natural antagonists to disease, but with added predatory fungi, and a wide range of beneficial bacteria," says Riggall.

"The products are applied in a year-round programme in conjunction with aeration activities, which are an important ingredient in their success. As a result of using the Natural Solutions system, greenkeepers have reported a build-up of natural resistance against disease, and most hardly ever use fungicides now, whereas they were heavy users in the past."



Golf green: has built up disease resistance under the ALS Natural Solutions system