Knowledge gap threatens us

BY RON HALL / Editor-at-Large

Pity poor turfgrass, the most misunderstood — and too often denigrated — landscape plant in the United States.

We walk on it. We play on it. We admire it. And most of us earn our livelihoods taking care of it.

Perhaps you've noticed that a growing number of our friends, neighbors and customers are questioning whether its benefits outweigh its environmental costs. That's not something we want to see grow.

The fact is, the U. S. public — while appreciative of lawns, parks and sports fields — knows little about turfgrass and what it takes to properly maintain it. Most homeowners don't know bluegrass from ryegrass, and too often over-water and over-apply product. The implications of this knowledge black hole for our industry and our environment are enormous.

In 2004, researcher Cristina Milesi calculated there are about 40 million acres of "lawns" in the United States. She used census data, satellite images and aerial photographs to come up with the figure, which amounts to about 2% of U.S. land surface in the 48 contiguous states.

The report she authored, published in the journal *Environmental Management* in 2005, focused on the impact of turfgrass on our environment. It discussed what she considered to be the good and the not-so-good effects of so much turfgrass.

On the positive side, she reported that turfgrass, apart from its aesthetic benefits, is an incredible "sink" for carbon dioxide. It accounts for 5% of the carbon dioxide absorbed by all plants, removing enormous quantities of greenhouse gases from the atmosphere. Most of us also recognize that turfgrass combats soil erosion, recycles rainwater and recharges aquifers, cools our urban environments and captures dust. That's just the short list of its attributes.

Milesi's report wasn't as flattering in addressing our water use on lawns (238 gallons of water per person per day, it claimed) and the environmental effects resulting from the runoff of lawn chemicals into streams, ponds and lakes.

Tack on the 800 million gallons of gasoline she estimated are required to mow turfgrass in the United States each year, including the emissions released into the atmosphere, and the report is far from being a glowing endorsement of our industry's most ubiquitous and important plant material.

This ambitious report makes more than a few broad assumptions that most knowledgeable people within the turfgrass industry would dispute.

What it says more than anything else, though, is that there's a huge need to educate the public about turfgrass, and especially on "best practices" in its establishment and care.

If we don't do a better job of this, there's no doubt in my mind we're going to find turfgrass to be a smaller and smaller part of our lives — both professionally and within our society. The loss to our industry and our environment would be staggering.

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The public, by and large, knows little about turfgrass selection and proper care in terms of mowing, irrigation and chemical use.