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*from Mario Lanthier*

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**SURVIVING A PESTICIDE BAN: THE ONTARIO EXPERIENCE**



The “Landscape Ontario Congress” was held January 12 to 14 in Toronto, Ontario.

This was the 37<sup>th</sup> annual event, organized by Landscape Ontario. It includes a horticulture lawn and garden trade show. Attendance was 14,000 persons in 2008. See [www.locongress.com](http://www.locongress.com).

On January 11 was the 45<sup>th</sup> annual IPM Symposium, a day-long gathering of commercial landscape companies and public agencies.

Frustrated. Challenged. Disappointed. Treated unfairly. Helpless. “That’s how we felt going into 2009” said Mark Goodman of Envioking Lawncare. “But now we are starting to be optimistic about the future. We can focus on thriving in this new marketplace.” And those persons who are negative, all doom-and-gloom? “We have hope for them as well” he added.

Those words were the opening remarks at the 45<sup>th</sup> annual IPM Symposium, held January 11 in Toronto as part of the Landscape Ontario Congress. Titled “How I Survived the Ban”, the IPM Symposium was attended by about 150 persons, mostly commercial lawn care companies with a few municipal employees.

In April 2009, the Ontario provincial government implemented the “Cosmetic Pesticides Ban Act”, a legislation prohibiting the sale and use of many pesticides for “cosmetic purposes” in urban areas. Exemptions are in place for pests of buildings and invasive species, also for golf courses who are IPM accredited and tree pests confirmed by a certified arborist.

### ***Lawn care programs under the ban***

Listening to the speakers at this conference, the commercial lawn care under a pesticide ban is combining education of the customer, a technician with more knowledge, a service based on cultural practices, and post-emergence weed control with newly registered natural herbicides.

“This new reality was driven by politicians, not by the market” said Gavin Dawson of Green Lawn Care. “The customer expects the same today as it did 20 years ago – a weed free lawn. Our challenge is to find new ways to deliver it, without the products of the past.”

He explained the lawn care companies have to offer “something different” to continue operating under a pesticide ban. “I agree” said Chris Lemcke of Turf Operations Inc. (Weed Man). “Forget the past 40 years. We need to rebrand. We used to say ‘2,4-D is safe’. Now we say ‘We have never been so safe’.”

The new pesticides allowed under the ban are more expensive and require longer to apply, or must be applied more often. “This business requires higher prices” said Lemcke. “We will lose the customers used to cheap lawn care of the past 40 years.”

What is the expectation of the customer? How many weeds are they willing to accept? Commented one speaker: “We tell our new customers there is no more quick fix. We have to build the health of the soil and the health of the turf. That takes time.”

Overseeding and fertilization are “the best weed control program”, according to Richard Reed of Dufferin Lawn Life. There is enormous interest in topdressing with palletized compost, which improves soil biology in a cost effective manner. He added: “It must be cold pressed pellets, not heat pressed which will destroy the beneficial microorganisms”.

“It has to be a complete service package” said Gavin Dawson. “More visits are required. If your program is 3 or 4 visits per year, you will have unhappy customers.” Chris Lemcke agreed. “Gone are the one-call customers. Gone are the calendar-based visits.”

### ***The impact on companies***

“The year 2009 was a perfect storm scenario” said Gavin Dawson, from Green Lawn Care. “We had to deal with the pesticide ban, a bad economy and the new federal ‘do not call’ registry. All the usual tools were taken away from us.”

There was no large-scale closure of commercial lawn care companies. Persons who say “7000 persons have lost employment in Ontario” are not using scientific data.

Lawn care companies closed their doors all across Canada during 2009, not only in Ontario, likely because of the economic climate. Also, garden centers in Eastern Canada had excellent sales in April and May but poor sales in June and July, because of extended rainfall during the summer.

Lawn care companies who did not want to change their programs have closed, taking jobs away with them. Companies that waited until 2009 to implement changes saw a drop in revenues of 10 to 30%. Companies that implemented changes before 2009 had a good year, comparable to 2008, or slightly better.

Studies are available from the City of Toronto, where a pesticide ban has been in place since 2004. Using data from Statistics Canada, Toronto Public Health reports the number of "landscaping service" companies went up slightly between 2001 and 2006. Using data from the polling firm IPSOS, the same agency reports little change in the number of households hiring or not hiring lawn care companies.

### ***New products***

"The pesticide ban was put in place before there was science to support it. But then, maybe there would be no scientific research for alternatives if there was no ban". So said Pamela Charbonneau, the turfgrass specialist for the Ontario government.

The new "natural" herbicide Sarritor is expected to be available in Western Canada this coming season, on a pre-order, pre-payment basis. The active ingredient is a strain of the fungus *Sclerotinia* which infects and kills treated broadleaf weeds. Results in commercial programs in Ontario indicate good post-emergence control of dandelion when applied in late summer. Weather, method of application and quality of coverage appear to be critical to obtain good results.

Many have heard of corn gluten meal. Commercial lawn care companies report it is useful for control of crabgrass, but not effective against other lawn weeds. One speaker advised to apply at 20 pounds per 1000 square feet anytime between forsythia in full bloom and lilac in full bloom, followed by rain or irrigation.

Another new "natural" pesticide for post-emergence control of broadleaf weeds was submitted for registration and is expected to be available in 2011 under the brand name Fiesta. The active ingredient is a formulation of chelated iron from a European source. Field trials indicated over 90% control of dandelion and black medic.

Yet another "natural" herbicide was submitted for registration in 2009. The active ingredient is the fungus *Phoma macrostoma*, isolated by researchers of Agriculture Canada in Saskatchewan. The label will likely include dandelion and Canada thistle.