



# When Clients Have Questions: A Guide for Professional Pesticide Applicators<sup>1</sup>

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Frederick M. Fishel<sup>2</sup>

*This guide addresses situations that professional pesticide applicators should take into account when interacting with those who don't have a working knowledge of professional pesticide application.*

## Introduction

Consider the following two scenarios: 1) Your company was contracted to treat a small neighborhood residential lake for control of unwanted aquatic weed growth. Several days later, you are greeted by members from the neighborhood association demanding an explanation as to why fish in the lake are dying. 2) Your lawn maintenance firm routinely applies postemergence broadleaf herbicides to the turfgrass of a large number of residential accounts. A week later, you receive an unusually high volume of telephone calls regarding damage to broadleaf landscape plantings.

The true professional separates his company from his competitors by knowing how to respond to either one of those situations. Where the competitor stands to lose accounts, the professional is able to save accounts, and possibly gain new ones by positive word-of-mouth from satisfied customers.

## Public concern: setting it straight

Professional applicators and those who use pesticides may occasionally hear the following questions and comments from concerned customers or bystanders who don't really understand pesticides. After reading the content of each bulleted item, consider how you would respond to each concern. Then consider the explanation that is given as a possible response to the concern. Professional applicators need to spend time with their customers in order for them to have a complete understanding of what is occurring on their property.

- "My garden appears to be damaged from the pesticides that you are applying. Are the vegetables safe to eat?"

Be ready to offer a return visit to the property to meet with the customer. Upon the return visit, visibly inspect the suspect garden in the presence of the customer. Should there be the suspected damage, there may be several courses of action. First, if the pesticide that you are applying is not labeled for food uses on plants growing in the garden, be willing to provide some sort of restitution. Under no

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1. This document is PI-124, one of a series of the Pesticide Information Office, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Original publication date June 2006. Reviewed July 2009. Visit the EDIS Web Site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.  
 2. Frederick M. Fishel, associate professor, Agronomy Department, and Director, Pesticide Information Office; Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611.

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circumstances respond by telling the customer that it will be fine, as long as you rinse the vegetables before preparing and serving. Remember, you are legally responsible for the welfare of anyone who may be affected by the pesticide that you applied. Alternatively, the pesticide may be labeled for use on at least some of the garden species that are present. Consult the label with the customer and determine the product's pre-harvest interval for fruit or vegetables that may be affected. Explain the meaning of the pre-harvest interval to the customer and what it implies. There may be one other possibility in this scenario, and that is any damage detected may not be pesticide-related. Some plants may exhibit damage caused by certain pests that resemble pesticide-related injury, or other disorders, such as drought or nutrient deficiency.

- “Is applying that insecticide inside my kitchen all that is needed for complete control of these pesky ants?”

Be ready to explain that no pesticide is considered to be a “silver bullet.” Your client will be more pleased with the overall results if your chemical treatment is used in combination with other non-chemical control tactics that they can use themselves, such as sanitation, trapping, and exclusion techniques. All of these are considered as part of the Integrated Pest Management (IPM) philosophy. Review UF/IFAS EDIS Document PI-39, *Enhancing the Effectiveness of a Professional Pest Management Program*.

- “I can see visible residues from the pesticide that you're applying to my lawn; is it safe for my children and dog to play on it?”

Be familiar with Florida laws regarding posting of applications when made to residential lawns. See UF/IFAS EDIS Document PI-6, *Posting of Lawn and Ornamental Pesticides*. The signs posted will specifically state “Pesticide Application, Keep off Until Dry.” Explain to the client that the label of the product you apply states this same message. Show the client the label and where the re-entry interval is located. Keep extra copies of the label in your service vehicle and leave one with your customer, if so requested. Some lawn care firms that provide various step-by-step programs throughout the year may not

be applying pesticides in a particular application, but only fertilizer. If this is the case, reassure the customer.

- A curious next-door neighbor observes a pesticide application that you are making to your client's landscape and remarks: “That stuff you're spraying is what is responsible for my allergies acting up and it gives me a headache.”

Under no circumstances argue with the neighbor. On the other hand, do not ignore the comment. Inform the neighbor of Florida's Registry of Persons Requiring Prior Notification of the Application of Pesticides. Let them know that if they have such concerns that they have the option of being notified prior to your arrival as well as other pesticide applicators that may be making treatments within a certain radius of their property. Tell them to contact the Bureau of Entomology and Pest Control at (904) 381-6006 to enroll.

- Clients may also use the following types of terminology when asking about the products you are using:
  - “environmentally friendly,”
  - “safe for children and pets,”
  - “harmless,”
  - “least toxic,” or
  - “EPA- or state-approved.”

Avoid using this terminology with your clients. The first four are relative terms and lack common definition, since all pesticides are toxic, at least to some extent. Other words to avoid include “organic” and “natural.” Organic leaves a false impression with the customer that the pesticides you apply are not pesticides at all. In reality, many pesticides are actually organic since their basic chemical structures consist of carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen molecules. There are some naturally-occurring substances used for certain types of pest control that are actually extremely toxic, much more so than many synthetically-derived pesticides. For example, nicotine occurs naturally, but its mammalian toxicity LD<sub>50</sub> value for rats is

between 50 and 60 mg/kg. There are few synthetic pesticides on the market nearly so toxic.

Each of these scenarios has a common theme: professional pesticide applicators have to take time with their customers and others to educate them about the facts of their business.

## Conclusion

A successful professional pesticide applicator in any setting will have knowledge of pesticides and how to communicate intelligently with customers, the public, and in some cases, the media. Professionalism is not all about how you and your equipment may look, but also your knowledge of pesticides; all of these compose your professional image. Continuing education, keeping up with current pesticide regulations, and knowing who and when to ask for answers is all part of the on-going process. What the public hears from you is their perception of your company. Use it to your advantage to set your company apart from the competition.

## Additional information

Fishel, F.M. 2005. *Enhancing the effectiveness of a professional pest management program*. UF/IFAS EDIS Document PI-39. <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/PI076>.

Nesheim, O.N. 2004. *Posting of lawn and ornamental pesticides*. UF/IFAS EDIS Document PI-6. <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/PI005>.