Project Type: Implementation

Title: ***Clips 'N Cuts:*** Unique Delivery of Lawn Care Advice to Reduce Reliance on Pesticides

Project Leader:
Mary C. Thurn, Research Support Specialist, Dept. of Horticulture

Cooperators:
Frank S. Rossi, Associate Professor, Dept. of Horticulture
Lori Brewer, Senior Extension Associate, Dept. of Horticulture

Abstract:

Lawns comprise the largest single agricultural land use in NY and are maintained by the homeowner/resident with information often garnered from radio, television and garden center staff. Recent surveys indicate a growing number of Extension Educators do not have the expertise to advise the public about basic lawn care. The goal of this project was to distribute a weekly e-newsletter to deliver "just-in-time" information to enhance county educators' ability to answer lawn care questions and over time reduce their clients' use of pesticides. While survey results and feedback were generally positive, overall participation was low and suggests other methods of providing lawn care information may be more effective.

Background and Justification:

There are over three million acres of turfgrass in New York State, with 82% growing in home lawns maintained by homeowners/residents. A general lack of knowledge about lawn care by the public is evidenced by the fact that up to half of all residential landscape inquiries to Cornell Cooperative Extension county offices are about lawns (personal communications from educators in 29 counties to L. Brewer). It is a topic that county educators (increasingly short staffed and broadly trained) and Master Gardener Volunteers (MGV) should be prepared to discuss.

Interviews of 55 Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) Community Horticulture Programs revealed that staff members and MGV "believe campus efforts should focus on improving the resources and training efforts in order to help educators and volunteers answer questions better". They particularly emphasized the need for regular communication from campus programs.

In an effort to address these needs, the Clips 'N Cuts newsletter was developed to provide CCE educators and volunteers with timely growing season lawn care advice focused on maintaining a dense turf while reducing chemical pesticide use. A social forum through Moodle was also provided to encourage further discussion around current topics volunteers. Newsletters were archived for access at any time.

Objectives:

1. Effectively communicate timely information about IPM-based lawn care to CCE county educators and Master Gardener Volunteers.

2. Use a social forum to discuss IPM-based lawn care strategies and enhance learning opportunities for CCE educators and volunteers.
3. Conduct formative evaluation to identify effectiveness in achieving these objectives.

Procedures:

Objective 1. Weekly e-newsletters focusing on timely topics were developed and sent to 195 county educators and volunteers. Discussion and photos addressed relevant factors such as identification, influence of current weather conditions and research-based options for management. Links to articles and sites for more detailed information were also provided.

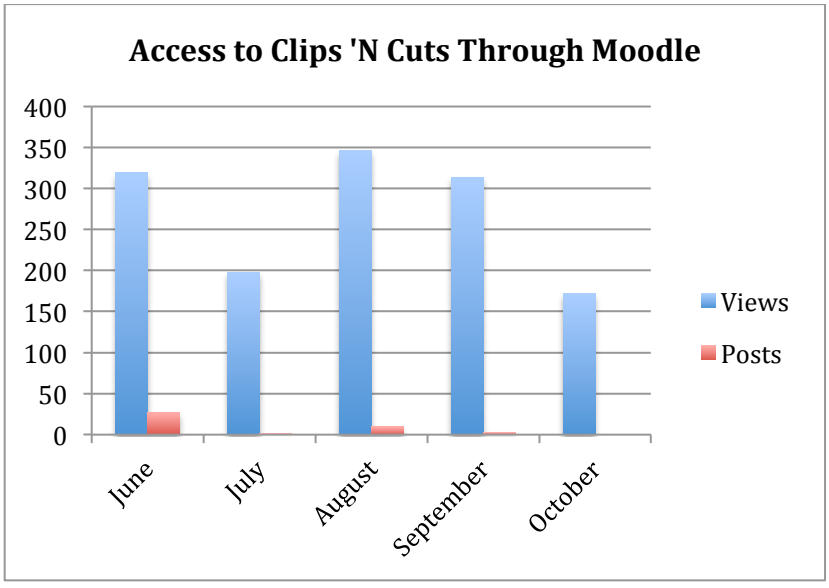
Objective 2. A social forum was created using the distance learning software Moodle to encourage discussion on current topics and provide the opportunity for users to ask questions and comment on other posts. Moodle was used to track usage and as an archive for access to all newsletters.

Objective 3. Feedback was solicited at a final survey was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of this method of delivery and use of information.

Results:

A typical newsletter featured one or two lawn care topics of particular interest or concern at that time of year. Discussion was limited to key points, but other sources of information were provided for those interested in learning more. Photos were included to emphasize and clarify important considerations such as identification or product labeling. Three sample newsletters are attached. All newsletters may be accessed through the archive at http://moodle2.cce.cornell.edu/login/index.php.

Over five months, a total of 81 out of 195 recipients accessed the Moodle website at least once to review an issue of Clips 'N Cuts. There were 41 posts.



Feedback was solicited from recipients at the end of July. There were 11 responses. Five were positive, three said they didn't have time, two commented that access through Moodle required too many steps and one wasn't aware of the newsletter.

A final survey was sent at the end of October. Participation was low, with 23 recipients answering one or more of the eight questions. Responses and comments could be divided into three main categories: 1) information was timely and useful, 2) not enough time or staff available to keep up with information coming from Cornell, and 3) access through Moodle was not particularly user friendly.

Positive comments noted the easy to read format, good visuals and timely topics. Some incorporated information into their own newsletters or provided copies at community outreach programs. Specific examples of information that raised awareness and knowledge of IPM-based lawn care include timing of lawn care practices, fall fertilization, weed-and-feed products, turfgrass selection, seed sources and how to deal with leaves.

There were several who indicated that lack of time was the main reason they didn't access the newsletter regularly. Staff reductions, fewer volunteers and the overwhelming volume of information coming from Cornell were cited as impediments for some counties trying to provide coverage for many commodities. A couple noted they didn't get many lawn questions, so it was not a priority.

The Moodle format was not easy to navigate for some, or it required too many steps to get to the newsletter.

Discussion:

About 40% of the targeted audience accessed a newsletter at least once over a five-month period. Use of the social forum for questions and discussion was sporadic, and only 12% of recipients responded to the final survey. Low survey participation makes it unsuitable to draw conclusions based on statistical analysis, but it does suggest there are more effective ways to provide information about lawn care to county educators.

A typical in-person training session for educators and Master Gardener volunteers reaches 20 to 60 people and provides a forum for one-to-one interaction with participants. This method offers the advantage of tailoring the presentation to the interests and concerns of a particular region of the state. It also allows the opportunity to provide general information on turfgrass, which in turn makes it easier to understand the reasons for specific lawn care recommendations.

Moodle may have been a barrier for some who could not or would not follow the necessary steps to access the newsletter. Repurposing the information in a format readily accessible for printing might encourage more widespread use and distribution. One option is to create mini-posters (81/2 x 11 and 11 x 17 versions) that are ready-to-use for newsletters or at public outreach events. Topics could be announced at appropriate times during the year and focus on key issues such as mowing, fertilization, weed control, turfgrass selection and establishment.

A larger scale possibility is to develop a series of one-day regional training workshops for CCE educators and Master Gardener Volunteers. This approach combines the benefit of personal interaction with the opportunity to provide more in-depth background and understanding of IPM

strategies for lawn care. Workshops could offer hands-on sessions to learn turfgrass and weed identification or understand product labels. Discussions with educators and volunteers around the state could determine additional educational materials or approaches to increase public interest in and knowledge about lawn care.