

Down with weeds

Summerset markets alternative to broad-use herbicides

BY DAN LEMKE

Bloomington, Minn. — AllDown Green Chemistry Herbicide, an all-natural weed control product developed by Summerset Products, is ahead of its class.

AllDown is the first and only herbicide to be listed on the approved products list by the Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI). That approval, obtained in May 2002, makes AllDown a viable option for organic growers, for whom weed control is a constant battle.

"The OMRI listing was very important to us," says Summerset Vice President Bruce Marrs. "Without it, we would have had to get approval from a number of smaller organizations for it to be available to organic farmers. Once OMRI gives it their blessing, the others accept it, too."

AllDown is a nonselective weed and grass herbicide made from natural ingredients including acetic and citric acids, garlic and yucca extracts.

"It's a broad use herbicide — it works on broadleaf weeds, thistles, dandelions, velvetleaf and more," Marrs says. "It also works on a number of grasses like quack. It kills most of the weeds, others it browns and retards their growth for a period of time and allows a crop canopy to cover them."

Suck 'em dry

AllDown works as a desiccant, meaning plant leaves are burned by dehydration. Research from Iowa State University shows AllDown has quick knockdown and is effective on killing whatever plant it contacts.

The formula for AllDown took more than seven years to develop, as company founder and president Paul Marrs worked with a plant scientist to reach the right mixture. The first products "ate holes through the

leaves but didn't kill the plant." Encouraged by early results, Marrs continued to do research. He finally came up with a winning combination.

Unlike its well-known synthetic counterpart Roundup, it takes more than a few drops for AllDown to successfully kill weeds. Paul Marrs says it takes a fairly heavy coating with a spot sprayer for the herbicide to work. It is also more effective on smaller plants.

Currently, AllDown is being marketed predominantly to the Midwest farm industry. However, Summerset Products is designing a consumer retail package for the lawn and garden market. Summerset also markets organic-based, phosphate-free fertilizers, developed with AURI's assistance.

Works in the wilderness

While organic farmers and gardeners are the market target, other opportunities are emerging for AllDown. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is using AllDown in Washington and Oregon to help control noxious and invasive weed species in national parks and protected prairies.

"The government is also restricted in what they can do in certain areas," Paul Marrs says. "They can't just go in and knock a whole area down because it may contain protected or rare plants."

Marrs says AllDown's coverage requirement is about five gallons per acre, more than many traditional chemicals. But for organic farmers, government applicators or environmentally conscious homeowners, AllDown is a natural alternative with a future.

"We have a lot of hope for this product," says Paul Marrs. ■

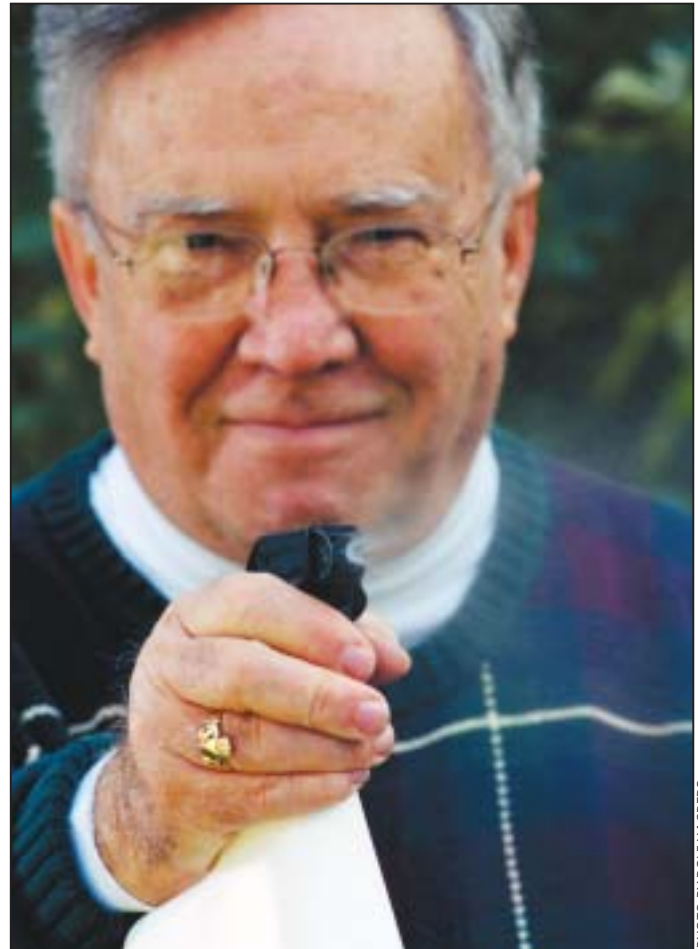


PHOTO BY ROLF HAGBERG

Paul Marrs, founder and president of Summerset Products, sprays his company's newest product, AllDown Green Chemistry Herbicide, an all-natural, broad-use weed killer.

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erosion control arenas. Karpik's business is taking over an Iowa operation that uses corn stalks for fiber blankets.

"Corn stalks should start replacing paper," Karpik says. "Paper isn't as good — it's just available. Corn has a better carbon to nitrogen ratio and contributes much more to the soil. That's what we want."

Karpik says erosion control mats are used on road construction projects, airport runway

construction, playgrounds, lawns, golf courses or wherever fields cannot be left barren.

"You can only afford to ship so far," Karpik says, before shipping costs of the light, yet bulky materials begin to make them less affordable. However, "it would be easy to set up operations every 500 miles or so to take care of opportunities."

Bagging the compost market *Mississippi Topsoils*

Cold Spring, Minn. — Turning dried poultry processing waste, wood chips, leaves and

grass into quality compost doesn't just happen. It takes close monitoring of a computerized process, says Brad Matuska of Mississippi Topsoils.

The company produces Soil Essentials Premium Compost in 20-ton sealed bins. Computers control the process of mixing waste materials, maintaining optimal temperature within the bins, recycling leachate and channeling exhaust to reduce odor. After about six months, bacteria and heat transform the mixture into clean, odorless humus.

Mississippi Topsoils has the capacity to produce about 50,000 one-cubic-foot bags a year, using waste from the nearby Gold'n Plump poultry processing facility. The bagged compost is sold statewide in garden centers. Since production costs are relatively high, the compost is marketed as a premium product. "We found that price wasn't a driving force," Matuska says. "But quality is." ■