

MAKING SENSE OF LAWN AND GARDEN PRODUCTS

Occasionally when I'm visiting the lawn and garden section at one of the major chain retailers, I notice a fellow shopper looking confused by the vast array of products. Normally I resist the urge to comment on their selection, but in my head I'm often screaming "Nooo, not that product! You're wasting your money!"

Since it's probably best for me to continue my practice of remaining silent, I'll offer a few tips here to help you select the product that will meet your needs. But first, a piece of general advice. You will probably increase your odds of success if you do a bit of research up front. As an example, "I need a product that controls lace bugs on azaleas" is a much better starting point than "My azalea has a problem and I need something that will fix it."

Obviously, this will require doing some research prior to driving to the store, but may save you the hassle and expense of a second trip when you buy the wrong product the first time.

If the internet is your preferred research tool, when you go to your favorite search engine (Bing or Google or whatever) try typing NCSU after your search term. In other words, instead of searching for "azalea insects" try "azalea insects NCSU". That way you're more likely to find information from unbiased experts, often leaders in their field. If the initial results aren't helpful, try "azalea insects Clemson" or "azalea insects Virginia Tech".

Another good research tool is the local County Center of NC Cooperative Extension. That, of course, is where I work, and I'd be happy to hear from you. You can email me at paul_mckenzie@ncsu.edu or call my office (252-438-8188) or cell (252-213-6095).

If you discover that the product you need is a pesticide (e.g. weed killer, insecticide or fungicide), be prepared to read the fine print on the product labels. In my case, that means taking my reading glasses to the store. Here's why:

Just as with over the counter medications, there are often multiple products that have the same active ingredient. Choosing an "off" brand can offer significant savings, but check to be certain the concentration is comparable and that it can be used in the same way.

I also recommend doing a quick scan of the instructions before making a final selection. This often means peeling open a little booklet on the back of the bottle. The purpose is to confirm that it will in fact solve your problem, that it's safe to use on the plant or site you need to treat, and that you have the necessary safety equipment (usually just a good pair of chemical resistant gloves).

Over in the fertilizer section, keep in mind that plants don't care where their nutrients come from. Your azalea isn't going to know the difference if you fertilize it with "tomato food", and vice-versa. The important thing is the concentration of the three major nutrients (nitrogen,

phosphorous and potassium) and whether the nutrients provide long-term “feeding”. Look for terms like slow release, continuous feeding, time-release, or simply choose an organic fertilizer.

Also be on the lookout for fertilizers that are combined with some type of insecticide or weed killer. These mostly have turf applications, and while it may seem like a convenient option, in most cases you are better served by purchasing a “fertilizer only” product.

But as noted, doing some research up front can pay off big, especially in the many instances where the real solution is simply pruning or mulching or plant replacement. It also helps you avoid the drama of your local Extension Agent finally losing his cool, creating a scene in the fertilizer section and being escorted from the store.