Ripple Effect # 58

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE CLOVER?

Do you recall walking barefoot in the middle of the summer on cool patches of clover? Or sitting on the lawn looking at clover heads, hoping, with each try, that you would find that lucky four-leafer? Have you recently discovered a four-leaf clover in your lawn? Or any clover at all?

Now that you mention it, you might respond, I haven't seen a clover patch—or any clover—on my lawn in quite some time. I don't even remember when!

What, you might then ask, happened to the clover?

A brief look at the history of the lawn care industry helps answer the question. Applying manufactured chemicals to lawns was launched in 1928, with the development of lawn fertilizer marketed to consumers. The proven willingness of consumers to apply this manufactured fertilizer made the fertilizer company's idea to incorporate an herbicide into their product a natural next step. So, when the herbicide 2,4-D became available—it was invented during World War II to fight the enemy by killing vegetation—a new blockbuster product combining fertilizer and this new broadleaf herbicide was launched.

As the lawn care industry grew, many companies followed suit. Historian Ted Steinberg, author of American Green: The Obsessive Quest for the Perfect Lawn, estimates that use of 2,4-D increased from 14 million pounds per year in 1950 to 53 million by 1964.

The problem, of course, is that 2,4-D and similar broadleaf herbicides kill clover. Chemical companies, understanding the importance of clover in lawns, initially responded with an alternative herbicide that was friendlier to clover. But when consumers voted with their choice of the new products over clover-friendly versions, clover was simply removed from grass seed.

The loss of clover, which had long assisted the cool-weather Kentucky blue grasses of most of our lawns, left us with stands that didn't contend as well against weeds—and thus required even more herbicides. And, of course, the loss of clover and its ability to capture nitrogen and thus to self-fertilize lawns, meant the need for more manufactured fertilizers.

However the clover in our lawns disappeared, its loss has far greater ramifications than missing the cool of clover patches on our bare feet in the heat of the summer—or not finding our lucky four-leaf clover.

In Steinberg's estimate, the loss of clover has thrown homeowners into "a cruel game of ecological catch-up" with our lawns that we cannot win.

Until the next Ripple Effect,

The Red River Basin Commission (RRBC)

The RRBC is a grassroots organization that is a chartered not-for-profit corporation under the provisions of Manitoba, North Dakota, Minnesota, and South Dakota law. Our offices in Moorhead, MN and Winnipeg, MB can be reached at 218-291-0422 and 204-982-7254, or you can check out our website at www.redriverbasincommission.org.