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# On the Oregon seed trail



Photo By Joel Jackson

*Lofts' Turfgrass Breeder, Dr. Virginia Lehman, explains the lengthy process of getting a new grass variety from the research farm to the marketplace.*

## The Oregon Seed Trail

BY JOEL D. JACKSON, CGCS

You say, "Willa met." I say, "Will lamb it." But no matter how you pronounce "Willamette," a valley by any other name would not be the seed growing capitol of the United States.

Lying between Oregon's coastal mountain range to the west and the Cascade Mountains to the east, the Willamette River runs from Albany north to Portland. Blessed with mild temperatures year round and abundant light rain-

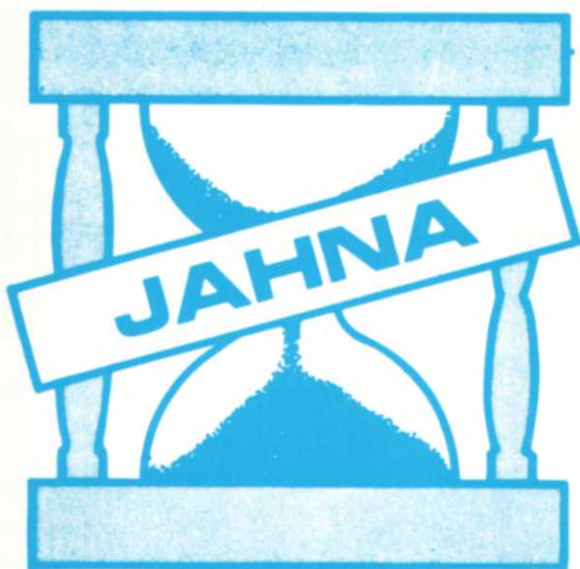
fall nine months out of the year, the Willamette valley is one of the nation's most fertile growing areas.

The Jackson family had the pleasure of touring the Pacific Northwest this past June. The trip was only for a week, so we each picked something special we wanted to see besides the gorgeous scenery. Susie needed to touch base with cousins in Seattle she hadn't seen in 40 years and a childhood friend now living in Walla Walla. My daughter, Jennifer, opted for Powell's City of Books in Portland, the



Sunbelt Seed's Joe O'Donnell is flanked by Great Western's Will Sheperd (left) and Jim Parsons (right) in a field of Palmer II ryegrass. Recent rains have the grass plants lying down.

Photo by Joel Jackson



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*Hoping for dry weather, Joe O'Donnell inspects a field of Crenshaw bentgrass that is surrounded by acres of blueberries and mint on the Helms Brothers farm.*

Photo by Joel Jackson

## Touring the Lofts/Great Western Seed Company operation in Albany, Oregon

largest bookstore in the world. It covered a whole city block! Brother-in-law, Alan, wanted to sample some microbrew fare as well as visit the friends and relatives.

As for me, I wanted to see first hand the fabled Willamette Valley and its seed fields. Joe O'Donnell, General Manager of Sunbelt Seeds, was kind enough to arrange a tour of the Lofts/Great Western Seed Company operation in Albany, Oregon.

I must admit I wasn't sure that the rest of our merry band would enjoy the side trip to the seed fields. We were trying to think of alternative activities for the group, but we decided that the road to the spectacular Oregon coast ran through seed country and so they tagged along. My wife loves learning about how things are made and soon the whole group was into learning about the whole process.

The process begins when Lofts/Great Western contracts with independent local growers to produce seed. For 1995 they have contracts with 139 different growers to plant around 29,000 acres. The contracts are risky for the seed company because they are "by the acre" and not "by the yield."

Interesting to note that it only takes a quarter-pound of bentgrass to sow an acre field that should yield a ton, and about five pounds of ryegrass seed for the same result. Think about the rates we use! The results can vary from crop to crop creating shortfalls and overages, which ripples on down to the consumer.

Bob Richardson, vice president and general manager, took us on a walking tour of the blending, bagging, and shipping operations in Albany. While golf courses focus on those 50 pound bags coming off the back of a truck, we were shown machine after machine dedicated to filling 2-, 5-, and 10-pound boxes and bags for homeowner use.

The bagging plant was quiet on this day. After all, it was only June 19 and all this year's crop was still in the fields maturing on the grass plants. Questions about when they would be harvesting were met with anxious glances and concerned looks.

"This is not typical June weather," Bob said. "Normally the rains have quit by now for the summer and we can start thinking about when to cut the fields. The cuttings need seven to ten days to dry out before we harvest and clean. If it doesn't let up, we are going to get jammed up trying to cut, harvest, clean, blend, bag and ship to meet end user schedules.

"We are at Mother Nature's mercy! You fellows in Florida have a little bigger window and can seed a little later than folks north of you. The physical output capacity of our machinery is our limiting factor. We can blend, bag and ship only so much product in a 24 hour day. The sooner we can get started the better for you and for us."

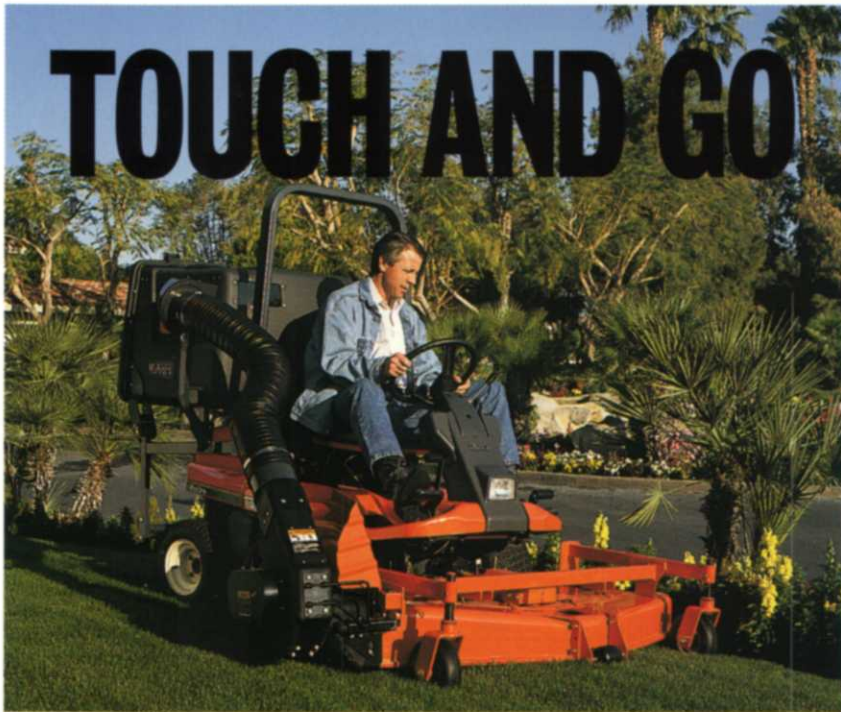
Another new wrinkle in shipping was shown to us as we toured the plant. It seems that the bulky wooden pallet we all know and hate is disappearing at least in some applications. Home and garden stores like Kmart and Home Depot don't have the time or space to deal with wooden pallets. They are being replaced with thin semirigid sheets of plastic. When the whole load is shrink wrapped it's easy to handle with a lift that has knife-thin forks attached.

We left the main plant and made our way to north to a cleaning plant operation. This is an independent operation that serves all the seed companies. The raw harvested seed is stored in deep bins and is moved around by suction lines and ducts.

Cleaning machines are like large vibrating sieves that glean out the chaff from the seed. Sometimes blowers are added to use air to separate out the seed. This is a time consuming step in the process and re-screenings can be costly. Once again, physical capacity of the equipment limits how much seed can be processed in a day.

I was flabbergasted to learn that the

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Photo By Joel Jackson

Recovery of 60% of harvested bentgrass seed is considered normal at a seed cleaning plant such as this one near Albany, Oregon. The tiny seeds are almost impossible to separate from the fine chaff.

## *‘...They use the cannons on the grass fields also when the geese are migrating. A flock can wipe out a field in a day.’*

best they can do with bentgrass is to recover about 60% of the seed that goes through the cleaner. It is just so small that it is difficult and cost prohibitive to try to get more out of the process. Quite frankly, the current process and equipment just isn't sophisticated enough to get any better results.

Now we were ready to go see some of the grass fields. Our first stop was a Crenshaw bentgrass field on the Helms Brothers farm. The bentgrass should have been at least knee deep, but the rainy weather had it laying down to about mid-calf high. Seed heads were evident and it wouldn't be long, weather permitting, before cutting.

I heard what sounded like shotgun blasts in the distance. Then from behind a windbreak right behind us, BLAM! We must have looked white as ghosts as we flinched. Our guides, Joe O'Donnell, Will Shepherd and Jim Parson were stifling laughs and grins.

"Propane cannons," Will offered. "The blueberries are almost ready to pick and they're scaring off the birds! They use the cannons on the grass fields also when the geese are migrating. A flock can wipe out a field in a day."

Gee, those geese are a problem even before we plant the grass on a golf course! We

# *painstaking work that requires patience, perseverance and humor*

zig-zagged out of the farm down dirt roads lined with all sorts of vegetable crops side by side with the seed fields.

Our next stop was a Palmer II ryegrass field. A crew of six people were roaming about in the field with burlap bags.

"They're rouging the field," Jim explained. "Notice how the grass is laying down from the rain? Also notice how some plants are standing more upright? That's a telltale sign of an 'off type.' They're looking for those upright plants and are manually removing them. A simple but effective method of quality control."

In fact, both Will and Jim are field representatives for Lofts/Great Western and they serve as liaison between the company and the growers making sure concerns are communicated and resolved.

They regularly inspect the fields for good management practices and purity. They both have Ag Science degrees and come from farming families. We had Jim identify some of the crops we had seen so far as we headed toward the Lofts Research Farm. After all, we had never seen hops, alfalfa, and canola in the raw before!

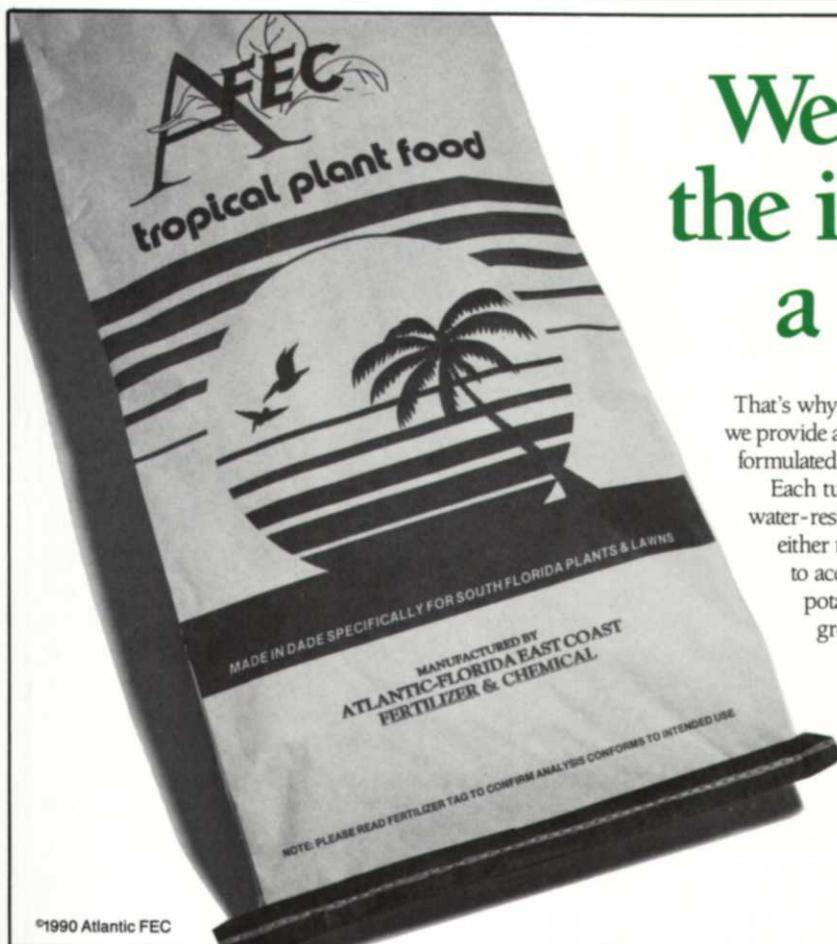
We twisted and turned down some back roads and ended up at the research facility in Lebanon, Oregon. I had met Dr. Virginia Lehman before at either the Lofts hospitality tent at The Nestle Invitational at Bay Hill or at a GCSAA conference. She gave us a chance to stretch our legs as we walked about the facility looking at the myriad varieties of grasses undergoing observation and selection.

Dr. Lehman described the lengthy process required to breed and select a grass

suitable for marketing. The repetitive process of replication of a desired trait and selecting only the best plants of each generation for testing and field trials takes anywhere from five to ten years minimum. It is painstaking work that requires patience, perseverance and humor. Dr. Lehman has all three.

We all broke bread together for lunch. Got to know each other a little better and then the Jackson clan headed for Newport on the coast for some views of that beautiful, rugged and rocky coastline.

We had spent a great morning learning about a part of the turf business we probably take for granted. It sure has given me a new outlook on that wonderful wacky world of overseeding we look forward to every year.



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