

Q&A: STNI's Roberts considers turf market boom

The turf business has been thriving of late along with the boom in golf course construction world wide. GCN recently caught up with Don Roberts, vice president and managing director of Southern Turf Nurseries Inc. (STNI) to talk about the reasons for the increase in the amount of turfgrass sod on golf

courses and to see how STNI was meeting the demand.

Golf Course News: What aspects of today's market have lead to increased demand of turfgrasses and what role has STNI had during this growth period?

Don Roberts: Southern Turf was one of the first companies

that focused primarily on warm season grasses and tif-hybrids and we have developed turf varieties that have become the standard for the industry. And since warm season grasses automatically require either sodding or sprigging for grow in, turf sales have increased.

However, back in the early to

mid-80's you were looking at mostly sprigging for grow-in, and with the right planning it worked pretty well. But in the last decade there has been a huge increase in the amount of sod being used on the typical golf course project because owners want to speed up the opening



Don Roberts

date, they want to protect the environment by controlling erosion and they want to limit the costly effects of washouts. More people realize that using more sod saves time and money in the long run.

GCN: How much more sod is being used these days?

Roberts: The total amount of sod being used on a golf course today has risen. Ten acres of sod used to be the design standard for a warm weather course, but now that number is closer to 40 acres, and the number of courses that are going with total sod has increased as well.

GCN: What are some of the projects that have gone total sod this year?

Roberts: Greyhawk in Canton, Ga. was a total sod course and we are seeing one to two a year in the Atlanta area choose to go all the way. We also just upped the amount of sod for Twin Eagles in Naples, Fla. because they wanted to speed up their grow in time, which is great for business.

But it also scares us a bit because anticipating demand is so hard to plan for. With the sheer volume of turf needed, we've started to automatically figure 10 to 15 percent more per order since the client always needs extra turf. As we near the end of the season this year we are scrambling to get the extra turf needed.

GCN: What is going on with the overseas markets?

Roberts: I just returned from the Hong Kong/China golf show in Shenzhen and that was very positive. There are a number of things going on over there and the business potential is great. Also in Asia, the Philippines has remained very stable. Europe is strong as well and we just opened a turf farm in Chile to grow cool season grasses.

GCN: Are you looking to start up more farms overseas?

Roberts: Having farms internationally will help tremendously because it gives our clients more value for their money—they don't have to pay for freight, customs, etc. It also means that we don't have to go through the exportation process on our side—totally cleaning the turf and making sure that it is free of all insects and soil. The only challenge is getting the registered-class turf over to the specific country and growing it in to make sure that we have a certified variety.

GCN: Do you think the turfgrass market will continue to expand?

Roberts: Certainly. This year has been great and we anticipate a better year next year. I don't see the market stopping in the foreseeable future.

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