Donald W. Morrill

Here's What You Need To Start a Sod Farm

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My views on developing a new sod farm are based on experience in the Chicago market, after working to develop three farms within the past dozen years.

Three principles are essential: management, site and market, and resources. I list them in order of importance to me.

Foremost, I think a person must really analyze himself before entering this business. As owner/operator qualifications:

1. Feel a genuine love for this kind of business (to the extent that you realize the occasional need of living with it 24 hours a day).

This is a manufacturing business unlike general farming. You can't just plant it and forget it. There are always problems — nature changes, labor, marketing, trucking, etc.

It takes a love for the game to get you through the rough spots.

2. Be capable of assuming the responsibilities of running a business.

As I said, this is not quite like farming; it's a business with special complications.

3. Experience in sod is essential.

I worked for another sod grower for five years. This is the minimum experience I would recommend.

4. Sales and marketing experience is valuable.

My selling experience was with Swift and Company; but any selling or related experience will prove to be profitable later on.

5. You must have management ability.

It will be necessary for you to be able to set up a budget, make the best use of labor, money, land and equipment. You'll need to know how to weigh investment against return; analyze consumer credit; and so on.

A turf farm manager must be a people motivator. He must be able to get his personnel to do what he wants them to do and exactly the way he wants them to do it. Teaching and training is what we need to do . . . not just order jobs done without ever explaining why.

Site and Market

Assuming you meet all these qualifications, let's consider site and market.

Today, 96% of the U.S. population lives in cities; the rest in rural areas. This means we must locate near the heavily populated areas.

Personally, I would not want to locate in any area that did not have a minimum population of 500,000 within a 50-mile radius.

One reason is that the distance from your market is a direct ratio to the number of loads you can haul per day and also is a yardstick to how many trucks are required.

Equally important is to avoid an area already saturated with existing or expanding sod farms. Examples are Detroit, Chicago and Milwaukee.

Let's assume you are entering the sod business to sell sod and not using it as a cover to speculate in real estate. In this situation, you will not want to sit right on the edge of a large city. Among reasons are to avoid rising property taxes, changing zoning laws, and complicated water problems, such as contamination and availability.

Let's place our model sod farm on a state highway. This location is accessible year-round; it provides good visual advertising; and in most areas it will exempt you from the frost laws that might tie up secondary roads during early spring harvesting.

The site should have adequate, clean water. Do not under rate the necessity of water. Check the average annual precipitation. Make sure an adequate supply falls during your growing season.

I would hate to figure on irrigating more than half of my requirements.

Check alternate sources of water — ponds, streams, rivers, and wells (check the water table depths to assure you can get enough volume).

I wouldn't consider a farm without putting down a test well first. In my area, we need a minimum of
CLAY

Advantages:
1. Doesn't blow.
2. You may dormant seed.
3. Good water-holding capacity.
4. Holds plant food for longer periods.
5. You can load trucks in the field.

Characteristics
1. Easy to work.
2. Doesn't crack.
3. Enables good root development.
4. Holds plant food well.
5. You can load trucks in the field.

Disadvantages:
1. Slow for root development.
2. Sod, when wet, is heavy.
3. Subject to cracking during drought.
4. Hard to work.
5. Water penetration is slow when dry.

1000 gallons per minute for every 160 acres.

Consider drainage. This is almost as important as water itself. You must be able to get rid of excess water before extensive damage is done.

One of the major growers reported $450,000 flood damage not too many years ago.

There are several ways to drain land—natural drainage, field tile, ditches, or pumps.

Last on my list of site requirements is soil type. Sod can be grown on almost any type of soil and in most cases successfully.

I would recommend that you choose a soil relatively free of stones.

There are three soil types I am familiar with—Clay, sandy loam, and muck or peat type. My personal reactions on each are described in the chart.

SANDY LOAM

Advantages:
1. Easy to work.
2. Doesn't crack.
3. Enables good root development.
4. Absorbs water easily
5. Can load trucks in the field.

Disadvantages:
2. Doesn't hold fertilizer.
3. Doesn't hold water well.
4. More susceptible to disease.

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