PRODUCING high quality turf in the hot, humid Southwestern Illinois climate is not an easy task, but Art Brockmeier of Edwardsville has proved it can be accomplished. He’s been doing it since 1955 and his sod has been improving steadily — especially since he has developed added know-how in disease control.

Sod farming is a dawn-to-dusk business for Brockmeier and his wife, Dorothy, and son, Ken, who join efforts on 140 acres. They supply sod for homeowners, golf courses, nurseries, landscaping contractors, industrial plant sites, small businesses and highway median strips. The Brockmeiers alternate the sod with farm crops on part of their acreage and also operate a sizeable fill dirt and top soil business.

They work as a precision team, handling a variety of tasks including seeding sod, spraying chemicals, hauling dirt, cutting sod and working the farm crops. During summer vacations and after school, area high school students provide additional needed manpower.

Throughout his 20 years as a sod farmer, Brockmeier has always stressed the importance of healthy grass in providing good sod. “The price of our sod is a bit higher than others in this area,” Brockmeier says, “but we strive for top quality. I’m a believer in good cultural practices. We fertilize adequately, aerate properly and provide the needed water.”

The Brockmeiers have experienced isolated disease problems. Two years ago, at a turf meeting, Brockmeier was convinced by a speaker that the proper use of fungicides could produce still better turf in his normally unfavorable climate. “Last season, for the first time, I tried a planned fungicide program and experienced unbelievably good results in a dry year,” he notes. “Fusarium blight is often a serious problem in our part of the country. It is especially troublesome when the hot, humid weather is followed by a
long dry spell. That was the situation in 1974, but 6 oz. of 'Tersan' 1991 per 1,000 square feet controlled the Fusarium blight. We applied it at the first appearance of the disease and repeated 10 to 14 days later."

Early Helminthosporium leafspot is another disease that has been a problem for Brockmeier. Last year, he applied "Tersan" LSR at a rate of 4 oz. per 1,000 square feet in 5 gallons of water when the disease first appeared in April. In areas where the disease persisted he made a second application about 10 days later. The disease was controlled. A third material, "Tersan" SP, was used at a rate of 4 oz. per 1,000 square feet in 5 gallons of water to control Pythium blight.

Water is most important both in the growth of healthy grass and in keeping the soil moisture high before and after the fungicide application for Fusarium blight control. We get our water from the Mississippi River Basin and use a field-length, circular watering system which rolls across the field as it waters. I'm now in the process of leveling portions of my fields, as some of the knolls get less water than I'd like, said Brockmeier.

Fertilizer also plays an important role in developing quality sod. "Fertilizer alone won't prevent disease," Brockmeier observes, "but properly fertilized grass is stronger and less subject to attacks by parasitic organisms. We like to use urea if we can get it. In addition, we use 'Tupersan' to control crabgrass and apply an insecticide when needed.

The Brockmeiers have enjoyed success with a number of grasses including Fylking, a mixture of Delta, Newport, Park and common Kentucky blue and a mixture of creeping red and chewing fescue.

"Over the years, we've removed our sod from a newly-seeded field after 18 to 24 months of growth. This way, we don't have to reseed often. We take it about ⅜ of an inch below the soil surface, leaving a portion of the root system. Within three weeks, the grass is beginning to grow back in again. By cutting the sod where we do, the exposed roots aid the sod in taking root in its new environment. After the first cutting, we can figure on a crop of sod approximately every 12 months," Brockmeier says.

In some fields, they alternate turf with soybeans or wheat. In other areas, they double crop beans and wheat. "We try hard to make the best use of each particular plot of land. Some of the ground is best suited for use as top soil and fill dirt so we are in that business too," he reports.

The Brockmeiers' sod business doesn't stop with the growing of good turf. When the sod is ready, it is cut into neat, unbroken rolls 18 inches wide and 6 feet long (1 square yard) for delivery or pickup. Examples of their sod can be seen throughout the Edwardsville area, including many lawns in the nearby, elite Glenwood Estates.

Good cultural practices have always been vital to the Brockmeier operation. Now the family is parlaying these qualities with a solid fungicide program for even better sod.