

Reacting to America's housing bubble burst, sod producers are growing a wider variety of turf, trying to convince clients not all grasses are created equal, while squeezing the most out of their bonds with landscapers and key developers. » » »

EXPANDING INTO NEW TURF

BY RYAN DEZEMBER
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Workers harvest Magnum rolls of Tifton 419 Bermudagrass at CraftTurf Farms in Foley, Ala. The 30-square-yards of sod were bound for the Magnolia Grove Golf Course in Mobile, AL.

they're counting on close bonds with their best customers, generally landscape professionals and commercial accounts. And they're encouraging designers, builders and homeowners to think about front yards as they might ceiling fans or windows.

It wouldn't be surprising to see an architect call for Hunter fans or Pella windows in their plans, but not many specify boutique sods such as Bella Bluegrass or Celebration Bermudagrass, says Tobey Wagner, president and owner of Mount Pleasant, SC-based Sod Solutions, which contracts with farmers throughout the world to grow the aforementioned sods.

U.S. homeowners spend about \$6.4 billion on their lawns each year, according to The Lawn Institute, a non-profit advocacy group. So, sod growers ask, 'What's a little more to make sure the most suitable sod is used?'

Dwindling demand

Sod farmers recently sold grass as fast as they could grow it. Deacue Fields, an agricultural economist at Auburn University, studies the turf industry in Alabama, where sod rivals cotton as a cash crop. In 2003, there were 69 growers. In a 2007 survey, Fields cited 97 producers because more farmers took up sod farming. But since the housing bubble burst, many of those growers are retreating back to row crops.

That pattern is reflected throughout the country. Farms that are sticking with sod are rethinking their business strategies. Craft Turf Farms has put more emphasis on renovating ball fields and golf courses and offers custom sprigging and seeding — niches offering expansion opportunities in a shrinking market, Craft says.

An old saw in the sod business is you don't put new grass around an old home. But by challenging that adage, growers

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IMAGINE BUYING a new house without faucets. Or suppose it didn't have a garage door. Maybe the front yard was simply a patch of dirt. The first two scenarios seem preposterous. But it wasn't long ago the third was reasonable.

In 1976, Robert Craft was looking for ways to expand his small sod farm business in Foley, AL. A builder in nearby Mobile hired him to lay a ribbon of sod around a subdivision's four model homes and sprig their yards.

"I went to the developers and said, 'I'll give you the grass to sod the front yard of these model homes if you'll allow us to offer that as an add-on to your product through you or to the customer directly,'" Craft says. "I don't think there was another home in there that didn't sod."

Growers in other states must have taken similar initiatives because sod

farming grew from a \$97-million industry in 1974 to a \$1.3-billion one by 2007, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Much of that growth can be pegged to the housing boom. And the next government survey almost certainly will show shrinkage as a result of the sod producers who plowed under centipede and fescues in favor of soybeans and corn.

To make up for lost business as a result of the housing bubble burst, growers are focusing on producing and marketing grasses developed because of specific traits, such as appearance and maintenance. More than ever,

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and landscape contractors might be able to stir up more residential business at a time when few homes are being built.

Picture a neighborhood where a dozen houses sit for sale. In newer subdivisions especially, there might be little to set one home apart from the others.

“If you invest \$1,500 and make your lawn look better, your whole house will look better,” says Rusty Stachlewitz, program director at The Lawn Institute.

An industry's evolution

Above all, sod growers are counting on the evolution of their business to carry it forward.

“When this first started, there was Bermudagrass, centipedegrass and some St. Augustinegrass, and that was the turf industry,” says John Chapman, general manager for Craft Turf Farms. “In the mid '90s, many new varieties came out.”

Universities and private companies

have scoured the globe to identify grasses with specific traits, often spending years to hybridize and test patent varieties before releasing them to farmers who pay a royalty for each square yard sold.

Now, there's Bermudagrasses that can tolerate shade, centipedegrasses that won't redden, and a bluegrass that can be sprigged and will flourish from Georgia up into Canada. Next year, Sod Solutions plans to introduce its Discovery Bermudagrass, which requires almost no mowing.

“From the onset, we recognized any type of consumer good goes through stages,” Wagner says, citing the evolution of Nike running and athletic shoes. “Ornamental plants, trees, shrubs — they've all gone through that. We have to do the same with lawns now.”

In the sod realm, there are grasses that only grow sideways, grasses that survive linebackers' cleats, grasses that

remain lush in almost complete shade. And as much work as it has been to develop say, Discovery Bermuda, which blends an Australian variety with one from the Netherlands, growers aren't finished because they have to let their customers know new varieties exist.

“That's one thing landscapers just don't know,” Stachlewitz says. “You're not stuck with the regional grass of choice. There's more choices out there.”

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Tobey Wagner, owner of Mount Pleasant, SC-based Sod Solutions, contracts with sod farms across the globe that grow all types of boutique varieties.



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SOD SOLUTIONS' EmpireTurf, installed in the yard on the right, requires less watering.



BEST-SELLING SOD

Mount Pleasant, SC-based Sod Solutions develops and patents boutique grasses it contracts with growers from Alabama to South Africa to produce. For each square yard sold, Sod Solutions collects a royalty. Among its best-selling varieties are:

- › **Empire Turf**, a course-bladed zoysiagrass with a high tolerance to chemicals, is a residential sod that needs less water than other varieties of zoysiagrass. First developed in Brazil, it's dark green and chinch bug resistant.
- › **Bella Bluegrass** spreads from rhizomes rather than seeds and will grow in climates ranging from north Georgia

to Canada, spread rapidly horizontally and only grow about 4-in. tall, minimizing mowing.

› **Palmetto St. Augustinegrass** will grow throughout the southern United States, from California to the Carolinas. Emerald green, it resists frost and heat, features a fine texture and will tolerate shade.

› **Celebration Bermudagrass**, which came from Australia, is an athletic turf that recently was installed in Tampa's Raymond James Stadium. It has a blue hue, stands up to cold and drought and has a soft texture.

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The greening of grass

More so than appearance, customers are requesting sod that requires less inputs.

"You want grasses that require a little less fertilizer, that maybe require less mowing," says Chapman. "Those types of characteristics are being considered, where as in the past, how much fertilizer you used or how much it took to mow weren't really considerations."

That's not to say traditional varieties aren't around anymore. Craft Turf Farms grows eight varieties, down from 13 five years ago, and not all of them are pricey patented grasses.

"If we have a landscaper who deals with us, and he has to have access to these kind of standard, old-school varieties, we have to grow them because we have to be able to take care of our customer," Craft says. "But the profitability of the company is dependent on being able to grow these specialized grasses."

Know your grower

In 2004, Hurricane Ivan slammed into Alabama's Gulf-front beaches,

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John Chapman, GM of Craft Turf Farms in Foley, AL, says specialty turfs are growing increasingly popular.

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destroying homes and low-rise condos. Overnight, Gulf Shores-based Kutter's Grounds Maintenance went from a business strictly concerned about lawn care to working almost entirely on installations, says owner Ron Kutter. Accustomed to throwing down something green when homeowners asked

for new lawns, his posthurricane workload came with challenges, such as salt spray, working with sand instead of soil and daylong shadows cast by 20-story towers. But there were lucrative new accounts to earn, and his relationship with a grower, Craft Turf Farms, paid off immediately, he says.

A year after Ivan, Kutter was renovating the grounds of Compass Point condominiums on Gulf Shores' Little Lagoon. The owners association asked for run-for-the-mill centipedegrass, but Kutter says he was able to talk them into a salt-tolerant Bermudagrass his grower recommended for the waterfront site.

Kutter's crews had just finished when Hurricane Katrina hit. Though Katrina didn't do nearly the damage on Alabama's coast as the previous hurricane, it caused flooding. Kutter's work sat under seawater for a day until the storm's surge slipped back into the Gulf of Mexico. Many of the ornamentals died, but the grass survived.

"I was a hero," Kutter says.

Landscape professionals need to form close relationships with their sod suppliers — they're crazy not to, Chapman says.

Likewise, the most successful growers are those who have strong ties to their customers, whether they're golf course superintendents, landscaper contractors or builders, says Tricia Roberts, executive secretary of the Alabama Turfgrass Association. Because of that view, the Alabama trade association has changed the way its annual conferences are organized. Traditionally, growers would be in one room, landscapers would be in another and sports turf specialists in a third room. Now, meetings are organized by topic — pest control or business management, for example.

"We realized we were continuously segmenting our members," Roberts says. "Now you'll have a sod grower, golf course superintendent and landscape contractor all at the same table." **LMI**

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