



Advances in turf production

Derek Edwards takes a look at the improvements in the turf industry since the mid 70s.

The cultivated turf industry has seen many changes and much growth since the mid 70s, largely driven by advances in turf grass technology and better standards of greenkeeping/groundsmanship. Because of the wide variety of good quality turf now available, a huge increase in demand for high standard and specific products has been generated.

Twenty years or so ago the average greenkeeper would not

consider for one moment the use of turf for repairing or constructing a golf green. The choices would have been limited to buying turf from parkland, meadowland or coastal regions (seawashed) representing roughly 90% of the then turf industry. Only a mere handful of purpose grown cultivated turf producers existed with limited or questionable supplies. Invariably the greenkeeper would end up seeding or creating an on-course turf nursery simply because adequate material could not be readily purchased. Even if the grass was suitable, the soil types would

not necessarily be compatible and vice versa. If anything, seawashed turf, because of its fescue dominated swards was purchased in comparatively large quantities for those who wanted a fine textured sward for bowling, golf or luxury lawns. However, for most of these applications the grass quality and strength were questionable as was the soil type which invariably was silty.

In the late 70s a few turf growers began purpose growing turf for various specific applications. For example a lighter, stone free soil would have been chosen and a grass seeds mixture or say an

80/20 fescue/bent mixture would be drilled (grasses of known quality and availability) and then the area intensively managed to produce golf or bowling green turf. To begin with this was slow to catch on, mainly due to its relatively high price but more especially greenkeepers were sceptical; because of the historical bad record of turf supply quality they would not trust the description of the turf given by the grower to match the product. Invariably, however, the material would sell but the quantities were small and very quickly the continuity of supply failed and the turf



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grower, lacking much experience, would resort to supplying material of an inferior nature which would then further disillusion the greenkeeper.

Gradually the increasingly discriminating greenkeeper was being converted and by shopping around could, by the early 80s, find reasonable sources of supply of turf which not only contained appropriate grasses but was grown on reasonable soil types and was produced with quality seed providing a very acceptable and attractive result. So it was catching on.

The boom in golf course construction during the 1980s fuelled the demand and as this coincided with an increase in agricultural land availability (thousands of acres taken out of crop production) a whole and significant industry was developing with many farmers turning to turf production as an alternative crop. Owing to the wide gulf between agriculture and horticulture many of these projects proved a disaster. However some farmers who took the trouble to learn the subject and to get advice from experts did and have succeeded in producing consistently good turf products.

This activity was being reflected throughout the whole of the country and abroad and encouraged turf machinery manufacturers, amenity seed producers and trade suppliers generally to increase production and introduce new and improved materials and equipment, further encouraging growth in the industry.

The first notable change was in the quality and reliability and choice of machinery specifically designed for turf growing (eg harvesters and mowers). To cope with the increasing acreages of cultivated turf, all these items were essential and the acreages since the 70s have grown from around 1500 to now well over 15000 acres of quality purpose grown material under production in the UK alone.

So advances in grass quality, improved growing techniques, better equipment and more knowledge have provided product availability, and demand has been born from this. Turf is now used in a amazing array of appli-



Harvesting turf tiles

cations – areas where turfing at one time would never have been considered. The main markets for cultivated turf are golf, bowling, tennis, cricket, football, landscaping and lawn usage, however we now see turf being used on industrial sites, roadside verges, river embankments airfields and so on.

Many planners, specifiers and especially end users today look for an immediate result, that is that the area is initially green and will quickly be ready for use – keeping the members or customers happy. Only by using quality purpose grown turf can these requirements be fulfilled.

For years the turf growers have battled against environmentalists who only see turf as denuding the area of its greenness and depleting the land of its rich topsoils. This has proved a nonsense in terms of modern high standard cultivations by skilled turf growers and emphasis is now being switched to the environmental benefits of turf. These benefits are too numerous to details in this article but briefly turfgrass provides erosion control, ground water recharge, surface water quality, chemical decomposition, soil improvement and restoration, heat dissipation, noise abatement, glare reduction, decreasing

pests and allergic pollens and probably most important of all to the environment, enormous quantities of oxygen that are given off into the atmosphere.

The one time “cowboy” image is rapidly disappearing and the launch of a turfgrawers trade association in 1995 for the United Kingdom has not only helped with the marketing of turfgrass benefits but has also taken steps to improve standards of the product and to improve the conduct of members growers who now total around 35. Named Turfgrass Producers International UK its members represent almost 80% of the total turf production in the country. With much work still to be done with the association barely two years old, already TPI UK has achieved the introduction of minimum standards of turf, a code of conduct for its members, a research and development fund and arranged seminars and talks for the industry in their regular meetings. All these from an association which has started off extremely successfully and provides the only group of turf growers with common and worthwhile objectives in the country.

Methods of turf installation or laying have also dramatically affected the industry in recent

years. We have seen the development of Big Roll turving systems (the original invented by Lawn Technology – now part of the Inturf Group). These systems allow mechanised handling of large sections of turf more accurately, less disturbing and several times faster than the traditional small roll of turf laying that used to be undertaken laboriously.

The industry has also seen developments in turf washing, where soil incompatibility could cause problems. Pressure jetted water onto the harvested turf removes the offending soil and the soilless turf is then laid on the prepared rootzone base, avoiding possible interface difficulties subsequently.

Reinforced turf – where soil stability can present problems such as in goal mouth areas on football pitches is also gaining in popularity. The problem with the modern rootzone mixture for say football pitches is that it tends to be designed for rapid drainage and therefore tends to be extremely sandy. The problem with sand is that it lacks stability and this is where the reinforced material can assist greatly. This stabilisation process is not, however, to be confused with turf or sod netting – sometimes referred

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to as reinforced netting. This netting merely assists the turf grower to harvest turf prematurely providing absolutely no benefit to the end user. It can be a hazard in certain applications. Beware.

Custom grown turf – this is where turf is pre-grown for a customer's exacting or unusual requirements. The specialist turf grower will import the specified rootzone spreading it to a predetermined depth according to the type of harvesting dimensions and transplanted when the facility construction has been completed. This turf can be laid by either traditional methods, big roll turfing or if there is not time remaining, the deep section turf tile can be employed and subsequently used also for instant repair work on damaged areas.

While many of these new developments are highly specialised and handled only by a very few growers the trend is



Installing big rolls

however, one of improvement of turf types and turf systems and associated services. The summer of '95 did cause a blip in the development and improvement of the turfgrass industry generally, leaving many growers with huge areas of droughted land, but it is accustomed to major variations in

climatic conditions and being a strong industry with innovative products and an ever growing demand for quality turf and services the future is both secure and exciting.

■ Derek Edwards is Managing Director of the Inturf Group and Chairman of Turfgrass Producers

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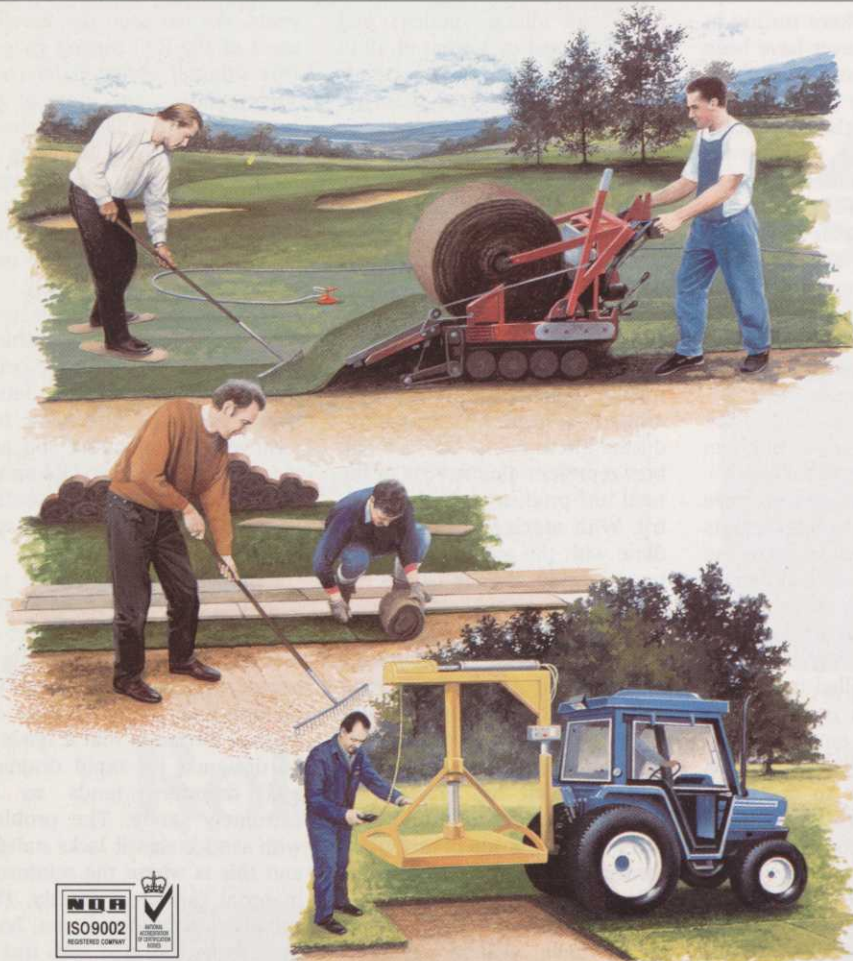
For more information about the Turfgrowers Association please contact Peter Adams, 12 Vixen Walk, Danewood, New Milton, Hampshire, BH25 5RU. Tel: 01425 638934 Fax: 01425 639195.

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