

Home Turf Advantage

By Thomas Skernivitz
MANAGING EDITOR

Growing sod is a growing industry, thanks in part to golf courses.

Harold Pirkle, the marketing manager at Pike Creek Turf in Adel, Ga., says new golf course construction and complete golf course renovation now call for an average of about 500,000 square feet of sod per job, as opposed to 50,000 to 100,000 square feet in 1977.

"And these days it's not uncommon to find a 3-million- to 5-million-square-foot job," he adds.

The upswing, Pirkle says, can be attributed to the contour of courses and the fear that rain could wash out seed-specific projects on those slopes. In addition, golf course real estate tends to sell more easily when properties are covered by lush grass rather than dirt.

"The prettier you get the course, and the quicker, the bigger the impact on your lot sales," Pirkle says.

Pirkle and West Coast Turf regional sales manager John Marman offered some insight into what a sod project entails for a superintendent, from beginning to end:

Sod growers offer advice on how to manage major projects

Pre-Purchase

► **Know your supplier:** Seek out references. Talk to fellow superintendents. And most importantly, tour each prospective sod farm, especially if the project is a major renovation that covers more than 300,000 square feet.

"Anybody can do a good job of putting stuff in a brochure. Anybody can have a flashy Web site. But the rubber meets the road when you actually tour the facility that's growing the sod," Pirkle says.

A tour is first and foremost, Marman agrees. "The demand for (sod) right now is pretty good, so sometimes you have a sod supplier that's shipping you stuff that's not ready," he says. "It's best to go to the farm and try to actually stake out your area and say, 'Hey, this is going to be my field.'"

If the sod is claimed well in advance of the project's start, Marman recommends selecting a field that will reach maturity concurrent with the job start. Between selection and delivery, he advocates making a few follow-up visits to the farm, especially a final trip a week or two before shipping.

In some cases the sod grower may mandate a maintenance fee if the claimed sod is not delivered by a specific date. "But you're still assured that you're getting what you paid for and it's the best-possible product," Marman says.

► **Buy certified:** Some companies sell only state-certified sod. Others offer nothing of the sort, and still more boast a split inventory. Stick to the growers that sell only state-certified sod, Pirkle says, and beware of those that have mixed inventories.

"In those cases, you just never know," Pirkle says. "It just depends on how honest the company is. They could say, 'Yes, it's certified,' but you might not actually know if you're getting certified."

Some states, such as Georgia, monitor sod farms and compare the square footage of certified sod sold with the acreage of certified sod grown. "They do

Continued on page 82



Some of the best names
on the course from the
newest name in the industry.

DIMILIN® Insect Growth Regulator FLORAMITE® Miticide
METHYL BROMIDE Fumigant OMITE® Miticide
TERRACLOR® Fungicide TERRAZOLE® Fungicide
TERR-O-GAS® Fumigant TURFCIDE® Fungicide

Crompton Crop Protection and Great Lakes Chemical
are now part of Chemtura Corporation

www.chemtura.com All trademarks and registered trademarks mentioned here are the properties
of their respective owners. ©Chemtura Corporation 2005 CH-ad04-0705 CCP-11005

Home Turf Advantage

Continued from page 80

that so the producer cannot have 50 acres of certified sod and sell 150 acres of certified sod," Pirkle adds.

► **Match soil types:** Sand-based golf courses shouldn't purchase sod that was harvested on clay. And although it's somewhat easier to place sand-based sod over clay because the water can still filter through the sand, it's generally best to match soil types.

"That's one of the reasons we do so much business in Florida," Pirkle says. "We're on sandy soils here (in Georgia)."

► **Test-ride the turf:** With more new varieties available than ever before, superintendents should implement test plots on their courses, Marman says. Management and membership can then evaluate each sample before buying.

"Put (the plots) in some really rough areas," Marman says. "Use worst-case scenarios and evaluate maybe 5,000 square feet over time. See how these grasses react before deciding to go wall-to-wall with one of them."

And don't be content with the status quo, Marman adds. "There are always better-suited varieties coming out for some tough golf courses," he says.

► **Think long-term:** Foresight is vital, Pirkle says. Whatever company is handling the initial job is the same company the superintendent will want to call upon for touch-up jobs over the ensuing two years.

"And there will be, in every sod job I've ever seen, a need to have some more sod after the project is complete," Pirkle says. "It's sort of a fact of life."

Pre-Installation

► **Level the surface:** The smoother the ground prior to laying turf, the better the grass will look in the long run. Ridges or bumps that aren't flattened prior to laying the sod will show through because the grass will follow that contour.

"It would surprise you how many times we get to an installation job and it's not prepped the way it's supposed to be," Pirkle says. "In some cases, we've had to delay job starts because they don't have it properly prepped."

► **Bottle the water:** In the immediate days before the start of a project, irrigation should be shut down, Marman says. Too many things can go wrong, which could lead to mud, which could prompt delays, which could mean spoiled turf.

"If somebody orders sod on Friday and wants it installed Monday morning, I always tell them to turn the irrigation off

Continued on page 84



Home Turf Advantage

Continued from page 82

over the weekend," he says. "If they do overrun the irrigation, chances are that you show up Monday morning to soup."

That said, Marman does tout a light watering immediately before the sod hits the ground. "I suggest hitting it for a few minutes just to bring the soil temperature down slightly and cause more of a suction" between the ground and turf, he says.

Installation

► **Big roll vs. small roll:** Increasingly popular is "big roll" sod — rolls of sod that "look like giant jelly rolls," Pirkle says. They measure 350 square feet whereas traditional small rolls are 9 square feet.

Big rolls cover more ground in a shorter time but require a tractor with top-notch turf tires and a special side-shift installation attachment that prevents the tractor from running over the new sod.

One pratfall of big roll sod is the netting that holds the product together.

"You'll want the sod company to remove the netting while the sod is going down, and the sod needs to be fairly mature to be able to do that without falling apart," Marman says. "If you leave the netting on there, later on down the road you'll have some bare spots where that netting is exposed. That creates a bit of a liability on the owner's part."

► **Prevent seam lines:** Although big rolls lessen the presence of seams, the edges of sod should still be staggered, especially on slopes, to prevent seam lines running end to end or top to bottom.

► **Peg it and plank it:** Speaking of slopes, turf planted on extreme planes or the borders of bunkers should be stapled or pegged to the ground.

And on putting surfaces, plywood should be spread over the new turf to prevent workers — often on their hands and knees — from dimpling the new sod. Plywood also prevents tire damage when installing big roll sod, Marman says.

► **Pre-plant fertilization:** West Coast Turf always suggests a 6-20-20 pre-plant fertilizer, Marman says, but ultimately it's the choice of the superintendent whether that is done and, if so, if it's put down beneath or over the sod.

Post-Installation

► **Open the floodgates:** Once the sod is laid, irrigation must begin immediately. Thus, it's best to double-check the pump station and heads before the project ever starts, especially if it involves new construction or the renovation of an irrigation system.

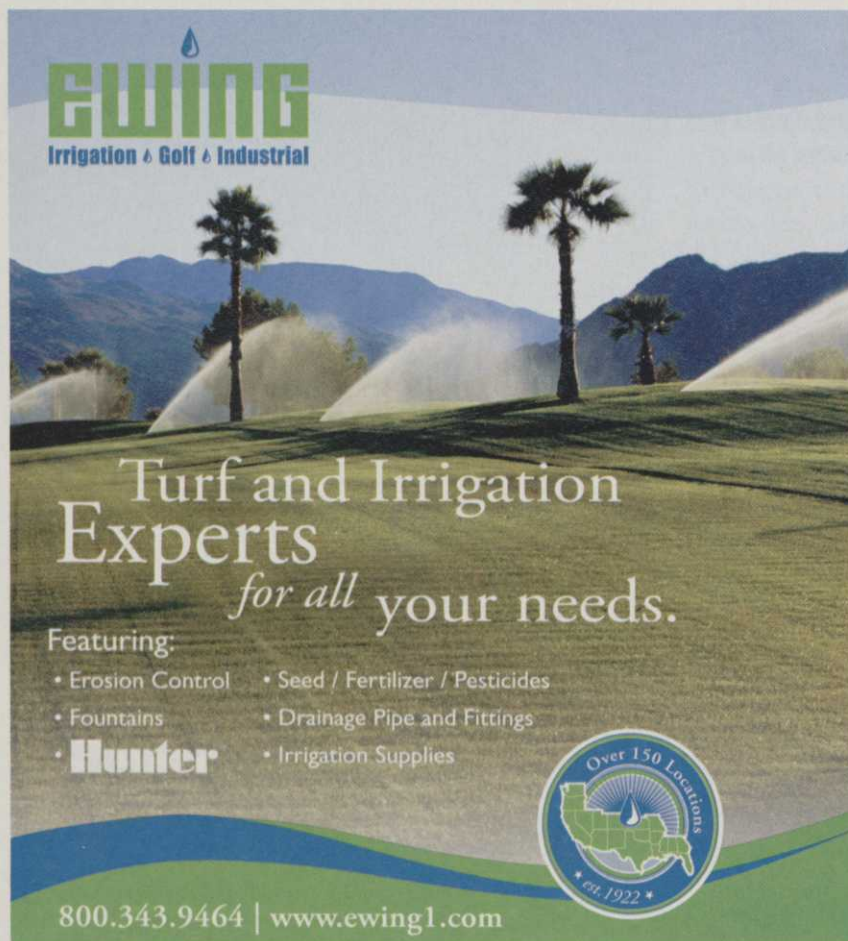
"The sod is not going to survive as well if you can't get timely water in," Pirkle says. "You don't want to start a project till you know for sure that your pump station is up and running."

The rule of thumb at West Coast Turf is to keep the top layer of sod moist by irrigating many cycles per day but for short durations. "You see people trying to deep water right after they put sod in, and it's not going to get you anywhere," Marman says. "We're talking five cycles a day, five minutes per cycle, maybe for the first couple of weeks. After that, maybe three cycles a day."

Of course, that can be difficult at a golf course. "Usually you're breaking a lot of the irrigation rules when you're working on a golf course," Marman says.

► **Delay mowing:** In most cases, turf should take root in two to three weeks, Pirkle says. Until then, mowing should not occur. "If it's not rooted down, you can actually pull up the edges of sod," he says.

With that in mind, Pirkle notes that Pike Creek maintains its sod at lower heights — from a half-inch to three-quarters inch. That prevents premature mowing, which can scalp the upper, green portion of the grass blade. ■



EWING
Irrigation • Golf • Industrial

Turf and Irrigation Experts

for all your needs.

Featuring:

- Erosion Control
- Seed / Fertilizer / Pesticides
- Fountains
- Drainage Pipe and Fittings
- **Hunter**
- Irrigation Supplies

800.343.9464 | www.ewing1.com

Over 150 Locations
est. 1922