

"Don't start the way I did," Bitterman Advises

By MARION RUBENSTEIN

More technical and marketing information for grass growers is needed by the sod producing business.

This plea for greater educational facilities to be made available to grass growers was made in San Antonio, Texas, by Fred Bitterman, owner of the Bitterman Grass Farm, located 12 miles from city limits there.

Bitterman, who has been in the sod producing business for the past 10 years, said: "What I have learned about this grass



First thing Fred Bitterman does each work-day is check water supply from city lake.

growing business has been the result of costly mistakes. There should be a central clearing-house of information, where owners of grass farms like myself could come to for advice," he added.

Until the time when such an educational source will be established by the sod producing business, Bitterman says he finds his best flow of information comes from speakers at the annual conferences and conventions held by the Texas Turf Growers Association, and the Florida Turf-Grass Association of which he is an active member. "Or, you

get information from the other members you meet at these conventions, as well as from trade magazines," said Bitterman. He reads only *Weeds Trees and Turf* and *Southern Florist*.

Asked what information he needed most, Bitterman answered: "Weed control and management. But I can use all the other information I can get. I am just a sponge for information."

Up until recently, Bitterman specialized in st. augustinegrass which he plants vegetatively. Recently, he has been experimenting with other grasses like Emerald zoysia. Because st. augustinegrass does not seed abundantly Bitterman wants to venture out in other grasses.

Largest Farm Has 52 Acres

At the present time, he grows one crop per year of st. augustinegrass on two farms. The one that is shown here in these pictures is 52 acres and grows most of his production. Two miles away, he has another 8 acres.

Bitterman estimated that the total square yards of sod he sells annually averaged around 2200 square yards per acre.



Sprays irrigation ditches regularly to keep them weed free and ease gravity flow of water.



Only sales promotion Bitterman uses is this sign at his farm, and phone calls once a month.

Nurseries are his major market. His method of sale is direct. "Almost once a month, I get on the phone and call to get business," Bitterman explained. All his sales are "field delivered." Bitterman is adamant on this score. "That is the only way I work," he said. "My customers come and get it and pay for it right here."

The reason for his unswerving "Cash Only" and "Field Delivered" rule is because Bitterman believes that "once the grass leaves you, you have no control over it, so you cannot guarantee it." It works, strangely enough in this credit-crazy age.

Bitterman has built his business through use of chemicals to get "a quality, bermuda-free grass." This was not easy and took much of the 10 years he has been in business because, as Bit-



Grass is mowed daily. Here Bitterman discusses proper height of cutting blade with worker.

terman explains it, "I was contaminated with bermudagrass. I tried a number of chemicals until I happened to hit on the right one."

As to fungicides, Bitterman said: "I have very little trouble on that score and so have bought very little."

On weedkillers, he uses pre-emergence. "About 300 pounds of Simazine a year."

Bitterman says he uses about 40 tons 15-5-10 turf fertilizer a year.

"I have had no trouble with turf insecticides and so I have



Experimental plot of Emerald zoysia, is irrigated through pump and sprinkler setup.

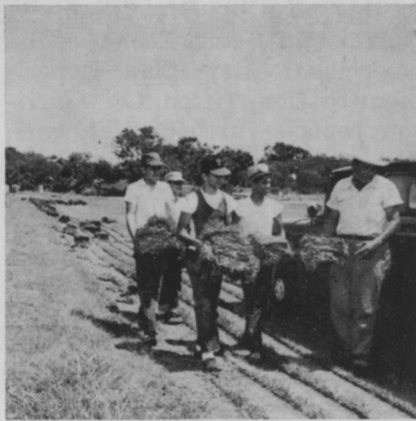
used no other chemicals," said Bitterman.

In his work, Bitterman said he used two sod cutters, a Ryan and a Sodmaster; one flail mower; one power sprayer; one spreader/seeder; three tractors (Fords and Internationals) a couple of Toro reel mowers and rollers. He employs five men on a permanent basis.

Having reached his desired goal of quality bermuda-free grass, Bitterman expects to expand his business this fall. In addition to the monthly phone calls, he intends to send out sales letters to a wider area of nurserymen this fall.

Educate Yourself or Hire Experts

Since he is the major sod producer in the San Antonio area, Bitterman has achieved success in his chosen field of work. He did it without any basis of technical knowledge. He had been an advertising salesman for the telephone company, with a love of the outdoors and pride in his



No credit problems. Bitterman sells only for cash; customers come to his farm to get sod.

own beautiful lawns. Would he then advise newcomers to the sod business to be as adventurous as he has been?

Bitterman shook his head and said in a very sad voice: "Very definitely NO! It's been both rugged and heartbreaking, the way I did it. I thought that because my lawns looked the best in the neighborhood I knew all there was to know about growing grass. I found out that what I knew was only a spit in the ocean. It's a sad day when a man thinks he can grow grass on a farm as well as in his own yard."

Because of his own heartbreaking experiences, Bitterman advises all newcomers to the sod business to do one of two things. "Either get yourself a good education by taking a course in turf management at an agricultural college, or hire yourself someone who has a good education as your turf manager."

To avoid further heartbreak, Bitterman advises all newcomers to have enough capital before going into the sod producing business.

"To do it right, you need about \$1800 an acre," Bitterman said.

He indicated further that this amount of capital was not in itself assurance of success. "You have to have at least 50 acres to begin with, otherwise the cost of operation will be prohibitive for you."

It can not be any kind of land either, Bitterman said. "It has to be the right land. The ground must not be too sandy," he added.

There also has to be the right kind of water. "You just cannot

function in this business today without an abundant supply of cheap water," he said.

As to the methods of irrigation, Bitterman had this to say: "Some will sprinkle. Some will flood. I like to flood, because it's lots cheaper and easier."

His source of water is a city lake, and it's all gravity flow with irrigation coming through ditches. A small pump and sprinkler setup is used to irrigate about one acre of zoysia and Uganda bermudagrass.

As to the future of the sod producing business, and whether it holds a good living for the newcomer, Bitterman was most optimistic and had this to say: "Yes, I think the industry will grow by leaps and bounds, because people are becoming more conscious of the quality of their lawns."

Sees Change in Preference

As to the kind of grass that will sell, Bitterman foresees the time "in years to come" when the current popularity of st. augustinegrass will "grow less and less." In its place will be the "hybrid bermudagrass which will increase in popularity because it is a finer grass."

In preparation for this change of public taste, Bitterman is experimenting with smaller quan-



Customer asks question; Bitterman (right) answers, referring to WTT discussion of problem.

tities of Tifgreen #328, FB #137 NoMow Uganda, Emerald zoysia, and Floratine st. augustinegrass.

"I have about five acres of all these new grasses," Bitterman said. "If the demand grows, I

will expand with whatever shows the greatest demand."

Bitterman feels that the zoysia Emerald will show the greatest increase. "It is the best of the long grasses," he said. "And we have had five calls for it within the last month."

Further advice to newcomers is to "keep up to date in your information." This can be done by constant consultation with machinery and insecticide salesmen and those of other suppliers. "These men get around and they know what is going on. They can help you a great deal," said Bitterman.

New Tifdwarf Bermudagrass Superior for Golf Greens

"Tiny leaves of a new grass species grow so close to the ground that many of them are never cut by the greens mower," is the enthusiastic report from R. H. Garrison, head of the Clemson University Seed Certification Department, Clemson, S. C.

Known as Tifdwarf bermudagrass, it was released in April

of this year by Drs. Glenn W. Burton and J. Earl Elsner, of the Georgia Coastal Plain Experiment Station, Tifton, Ga. Garrison reports further, "Tifdwarf, like other improved grasses developed by the United States Department of Agriculture and the Georgia Coastal Plain Experiment Station, was released only through seed certification programs in order that buyers might be protected and to insure that they do not get a substitute."

Comparison tests between Tifdwarf and Tifgreen were conducted for a three-year period at the Tifton experiment station. In these comparisons it was learned that Tifdwarf was equal to or superior to Tifgreen on nearly every score. Very close growth to the ground helps Tifdwarf tolerate a $\frac{3}{16}$ -inch cutting height much better than Tifgreen. Its softer blades and fewer seedheads also contribute to its superior cutting qualities.

At the Coastal Plains Experiment Station, Tifdwarf gave a darker green color than Tifgreen

and required less fertilizer to bring it to a comparable degree of greenness. Its purple basic plant color, that helps to keep it looking dark green in the summertime, becomes very noticeable when temperatures drop in the fall.

Tifdwarf is not available at the present time for home lawns or golf courses. Plantings have been made by growers in the certification program and the Tifdwarf variety will be available for distribution in 1966, Garrison informs.

The South Carolina Foundation Seed Association has made a planting at the Sandhill Experiment Station, and the plot is available for observation and test work this year.

Official information on the performance of Tifdwarf in South Carolina is not available at this time.

Persons interested in securing Tifdwarf in 1966 may contact the South Carolina Foundation Seed Association at Clemson University.



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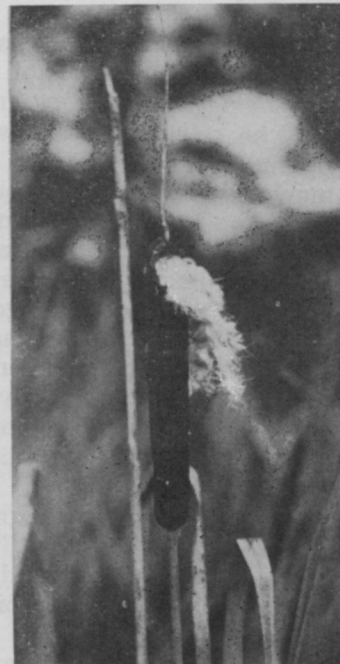
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