



"Cultivated" sod on Maryland farms is usually ready to harvest in 12 to 18 months after being fertilized and irrigated and mowed at 2 to 3".

## Sod Industry—Big Business In Maryland

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Sod production and handling is one of the fastest growing industries in Maryland, certainly among agricultural commodities. According to a survey conducted by the Agronomy Department, in cooperation with the county extension agents, some 7,000 acres of sod valued at \$2 million were sold during 1962-63. Recent estimates show that figures for 1964-65 will be about twice that amount.

In the Baltimore and Washington, D. C., metropolitan areas, sod, rather than seed, is being used to establish new lawns around most of the buildings, housing developments, schools, and even private homes. With the tremendous building boom going on in these cities and in adjacent counties, a lot more sod will be needed in the future. Athletic fields, roadsides, parks, cemeteries, and golf courses also use large amounts of sod.

Maryland, located in the transition zone between areas where warm- and cool-season grasses are best adapted, has many types of grasses available. Several bermudagrass and zoysia varieties as well as bluegrasses, fes-

cues, and bentgrasses can be grown. Most of the sod currently used is Kentucky bluegrass or a mixture of bluegrass and red fescue.

### 4 Kinds of Sod Now Grown

Four general types of sod are being used in turf establishment. There are: cultivated sod, semi-cultivated sod, improved pasture sod, and unimproved pasture sod. Cultivated bluegrass sod is seeded and carefully managed specifically for turf use. Bluegrass or bluegrass-fescue mixtures are seeded at 50 to 75 pounds of seed per acre on a well prepared seedbed. The grass is fertilized, mowed at 2 to 3 inches, and usually irrigated. Sod is ready for cutting in about 18 to 24 months.

Semicultivated sod is often seeded at 25 to 50 pounds of seed per acre on a poorly prepared seedbed, is mowed occasionally at 3 to 4 inches, and not irrigated. It may be used for grazing during one or two seasons and requires 24 to 36 months to become well enough established for cutting.

Improved bluegrass pasture

sod comes from pastures which were used several years for grazing or hay, then the cattle removed for about one year before harvesting sod. During that year the grass is fertilized and mowed at 3 to 4 inches to produce a thicker sod.

The unimproved pasture sod, just as the name implies, is harvested immediately after the cattle are removed. No effort is made to improve the quality of the grass. Such sod is frequently used on slopes, fills or in ditches where cover is needed very quickly and quality is not too important.

### Quality Specifications Needed

Unfortunately, specifications are not always set up for purity and quality of sod used around many buildings and in housing developments. Building contractors responsible for the lawn are often more interested in cost rather than quality of the grass. As a result much uncultivated sod from worn out pastures has been used in the past. Weeds, clover, and pasture-type grasses have been brought into the lawn and the homeowner or building



**Properly watered** and managed after being transplanted, bluegrass sod will continue to grow after installation.

superintendent has to contend with them later. Recently, however, with more high quality sod available at lower prices, and with increasing public demand for better sod, conditions have improved.

Sod prices in Maryland range from about 6 cents per square yard for semicultivated bluegrass sod uncut in the field to \$12 per yard for some of the new bermudagrass varieties. The average price for high quality common Kentucky and Merion bluegrass cultivated sod is 40 to 55 cents per yard, cut, and delivered to the buyer. Meyer zoysia, the most popular warm-season grass in the state, usually sells for \$1.50 to \$2.50 per yard or 5 to 10 cents per 2-inch plug.

Other popular grasses available in Maryland include Tufcote, U-3, and Tifgreen bermudagrasses; Emerald and Midwest zoysias; Penncross bentgrass sod, and Arlington and Congressional bentgrass stolons.

Because of the tremendous increase in popularity of sod, many farmers and other land owners are converting farm acreage to sod production. Numerous requests for information on sod management are received at the University of Maryland each month. Among the list of "other land owners" are businessmen, military personnel, doctors, and others who have retired to the "country." They view this as an opportunity to conserve soil and water and at the same time receive a profit from their land.

Several growers in Maryland

now have as much as 2000 or more acres of land in cultivated sod. They use different planting dates so that sod is ready to harvest at various times rather than all at one time. New growers usually start with a small acreage and gradually build up the size of their operation.

### **Mechanized Sod Cutting Preferred**

Presently most of the sod is cut with the usual self-propelled sod cutter. Then it is rolled and loaded on trucks by hand. Much of the hand labor will probably be eliminated in the near future with the development of machines to cut and roll or fold the sod in a single operation. Sod cut in short lengths can be folded and placed on pallets for loading and unloading with a forklift, thus increasing the speed of operation and reducing expenses.

One zoysia grower in Maryland has developed a highly mechanized system for cutting and packaging Meyer zoysia plugs. A self-propelled plugger cuts several rows of 2-inch plugs at a time and loads them into boxes. The boxes are hauled to a packaging shed where each plug is carefully examined for purity, uniformity and quality before being packaged for sale in retail stores in the area.

Most of the sod in the state is produced by reputable growers. However, there are some sod contractors who still buy poor sod very cheap, usually old pastures, and do a poor job of installing the sod. A strong organization of qualified sod growers and contractors is badly needed to help combat this situation. Much could be accomplished if a unified effort is made to discourage this type of operation. An attempt is now being made to form such an organization.

Because of the long period of time now required to produce marketable bluegrass sod—often 18 to 36 months—the Agronomy Department at the University of Maryland has recently started a research project to find ways of reducing the time to 12 to 18 months or less if possible. For producers who market sod as



**Rolls of top-quality** Merion bluegrass sod, one square yard each, ready for installation at a new construction site.

their major source of income, time is a very important factor.

### **Construction Boom Sod Boom**

With the construction boom expected to continue in and around Maryland, the sod market is expected to grow at a very rapid rate. High quality sod of adapted grass varieties is certain to be in great demand as consumers are better educated about the value of using good sod rather than poor quality cheap sod.

### **V-C Chemical Grows in Texas**

Expansion of a fertilizer marketing program into southern Texas is announced by V-C Chemical Co., the agricultural chemicals division of Mobil Chemical Co.

V-C president Charles T. Harding says the company will market nitrogen as well as other fertilizer materials and agricultural chemicals from its Lubbock and Pecos headquarters. Stafford L. Beaubouef, formerly with John Deere Chemical Co., will direct operations. Distribution points are established from McAllen in the east to Fabens in the west.

### **Rutgers Renames Ag College**

Known for more than a century as the College of Agriculture, this Rutgers University (New Brunswick, N.J.) school has been renamed the College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences.