



Entrance to Summit Hall's town farm in Gaithersburg, Md., as seen from Route 355. Body of water in front is a small spring-fed lake which provides a source of irrigation for part of the farm. Two other similar-sized lakes are located at other spots on the property.

Summit Hall Turf Farm Situated Amidst Megalopolis of 30 Million

By GERALD T. BRADY

THE mid-Atlantic region of Maryland, northern Virginia, Delaware, eastern Pennsylvania and New Jersey makes up a major portion of what is referred to as a megalopolis. Compressed into this seaboard corridor are nearly 30 million people, 15% of our total population. This is the spawning ground of suburbia in its most flourishing form. It is also the reason why Summit Hall Turf Farm in Gaithersburg, Md., could keep crews busy 12 months a year if the weather cooperated.

From the time of the first hearty crocuses in March until hard frost takes over in early January, Summit Hall helps keep the megalopolis green. More than 1,000 acres are under cultivation at the firm's two Maryland locations. The original 55-acre plant at Gaithersburg used to be picturesquely rural. Within the past four years, suburbia has sprung up on all sides and caused manager/founder, 40-year-old Bill Wilmot, to find expansion room elsewhere. Three years ago, the 1000-acre Potomac Valley Farm was estab-

lished to keep pace with increased consumer demand for quality turf grasses. The new farm is 18 miles "upstream" from Gaithersburg, and both locations operate on a capacity schedule ten months a year.

Summit Hall's main products are Meyer Zoysia, Merion Bluegrass, Scott's Windsor and some special-purpose grasses like U-3 Bermudagrass and others.

Double Production, Same Size Crew

Today the Farm utilizes no more manual labor than it did five years ago, but production volume has more than doubled during that same period. Like so many other agricultural businesses, Summit Hall was almost forced into mechanization due to a shortage of field labor. The shortage has been a proverbial blessing in disguise. Once underway, the mechanization program never stopped, hasn't stopped yet, and probably will go on as long as Bill Wilmot can find a new way to produce more, at less cost, for more profit.

The Farm's rolling stock in-

cludes a fleet of Ford F600 flat-bed trucks; a half dozen tractors including a Ford 6000 model, newest and largest in the Ford tractor line; 3 sales and service vehicles; several small utility trucks including Jeeps and pickups; several Ryan sodcutters; and a whole field full of mowers, vacuum sweepers, sprayers, seeders, plows, harrows, hydraulic land leveler and other maintenance equipment.

Summit Hall also has auto-



Summit Hall's founder and manager, Bill Wilmot, is surrounded by blue ribbons and trophies won by the Farm's flower show exhibits.

matic zoysia plugging machines which were designed and patented by the Farm. With these machines, one operator can harvest the equivalent of a dozen men working at top speed.

Machine Is Unique

Summit Hall's zoysia plugging machines are unique and unduplicated in the sod industry. They are for the most part completely automatic with the operator's job being simply to guide the machine along a given direction. Two pneumatic-driven cutting shafts alternately plunge into the sod scoring out a 2" diameter cylindrical plug with each thrust. On the upward cycle the plug is ejected from the cutting shaft and deposited into a loading crate positioned at the front of the machine. As the crate becomes filled up, it is manually removed to a nearly portable conveyor track and sent along to a flat-bed trailer.

The very unique feature of these plugging machines is the fact that they cut a cylindrical plug. Most growers harvest zoysia in regular sod strips and then dice the strips into square patches. Summit Hall, to the best of our knowledge, is the only commercial grower with mechanical harvesters that cut round plugs according to USGA recommendations. Each plug contains more than 3 square inches of sod, root and earth, cut cleanly and compactly to help prevent drying out in shipment.

The entire organization is



Workmen prepare to lower a section of eight-inch aluminum water main, which is part of Summit Hall's permanent irrigation system. When completed, the system will be one of the largest of its kind in the country.

knitted together by two-way radio. Trucks, sales vehicles, and even field tractors are radio-equipped. From the base at Gaithersburg, Wilmot can keep constant control of field operations, direct salesmen to calls which require immediate attention, and schedule sod installation crews from one job to the next. The radio network is another one of those improvements that he sometimes wonders how they ever got along without.

12 Miles of Aluminum Pipe

The Farm's new irrigation system, under construction now at the Potomac Valley location,

will comprise almost 12 miles of aluminum piping. Two and a half miles of 8" pipe will run underground along the edge of the grass fields, with hydrants spaced every 60 ft. along the line. Power-roll surface lines will run off the main and stretch laterally a half mile across the fields. The first phase of the system was installed during the 1965 growing season, in a year that saw extreme drought conditions in the east. Yet Summit Hall had its finest looking crops last year and credits the new irrigation system with the difference. Or, as Bill Wilmot put it, "No matter how scientific we get, let's



The Farm's radio communications network keeps all vehicles in touch with the home office. Frances Williams, one of the office personnel, is at the controls here.



The Farm's Mobile Tanker delivers fuel to field equipment. Many of the Farm's tractors, compressors, etc., are being switched to diesel for higher economy.

face it—none of it means a thing without plain ordinary water . . . and plenty of it.”

Serves Three Markets

The Farm sells to three distinct markets: (1) do-it-yourself homeowners for zoysia plugs, (2) custom installation, and (3) wholesale buyers. The do-it-yourself market is reached by a heavily promoted preseason sale between the first week in March and the middle of April. After that, plug sales are handled by the Hechinger Co., a local chain-operated haven for all kinds of do-it-yourself products.

Hechinger's handle both zoysia plugs and Merion Bluegrass sod. Plugs have been in the stores regularly for the past several years, but sod was tried on an experimental basis only two years ago. It turned out to be an instant success, particularly attractive to the homeowner who needed just a few yards for repair work. Summit Hall stocks the chain's 8 Washington area stores on consignment every Thursday, and picks up unsold



Automatic zoysia plugging machine does the work of 12 men.

material the following Tuesday. Returns are sold at reduced prices to a waiting list of customers who have registered their names with the Farm. Generally, there is little or no return material during the height of the spring planting season except for an occasional weekend of inclement weather. In that case, the Farm's office staff starts telephoning the waiting list and

within a few hours everything is gone.

Sells Zoysia By Mail

Outside of the Washington area, Summit Hall conducts a large-scale mail-order business for zoysia plugs. Promoting their plugs through the garden pages of metropolitan daily newspapers brings orders in from every corner of the country. During the most active season between March and June, the Farm harvests, packs and ships on an assembly line basis. Local housewives are used to help out in the packing shed, processing the several million plugs sold each season.

Besides the do-it-yourselfer, Summit Hall does a brisk business in custom sod (and plug) installation. Local newspaper ads bring in requests for estimates which are handled by two full-time salesmen. The conversion ratio of inquiry-to-sale runs better than 50%, thus keeping a three- to six-week backlog going between March and December.

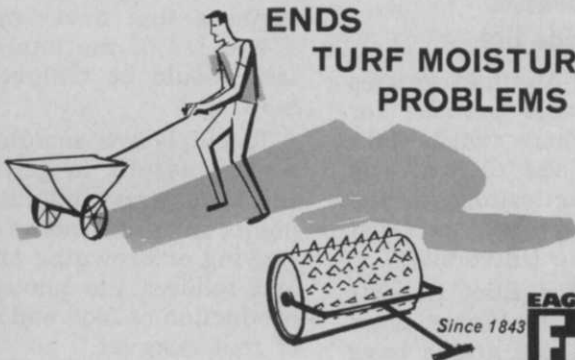
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and nurserymen quite often buy by the acre for a better price break. Others either send their own trucks to the Farm or have Summit Hall deliver a few hundred yards of sod for the job underway.

Jan., Feb., "Down" Months

All of this activity goes on between March and December. January and February are down months, with the Farm usually settled under a blanket of snow. As work tails off towards the end of December, temporary help is gradually reduced, with the best of the men retained as long as possible. Foremen and supervisors are permanent employees and usually each year a few of the more promising temporary hands are added to the full-time staff. During January and February this crew of 15 men overhaul equipment; paint, repair, or improve apparatus in the Farm's maintenance shop.

Labor Shortage Increasing

As soon as the snow starts melting in early March, the call goes out to last year's temporary employees. Most have taken interim jobs as store clerks and gas station attendants, but are generally available when the season gets underway. College students are added towards the end of May. The cycle is perpetual and, Wilmot admits, the roughest part of the business. Each year, according to the manager, it gets harder and harder to find enough field help to keep production rolling as sales volume increases. "We have a corps of men who keep coming back year after year," he said, "but only those who enjoy outdoor work." The alternative, of course, is mechanization and the Farm has done a great deal of it.

However, machine operators, truck drivers, packers and a certain number of laborers will always be needed. Summit Hall's problem is not unique; labor shortage plagues the entire agricultural industry. It is highly unlikely though that the Farm, which has grown from small beginnings into a multi-million-dollar operation in 18 years, will be stymied by this problem.

Maryland Sod Producers Unite; Form Sod Growers Assn.

"Better sod and a better sod industry," are goals set by recently formed Maryland Sod Producers Association.

Turfgrass producers in Maryland formed the association at a meeting in College Park, Md., April 19, as the result of discussion during a Maryland Sod Producers Conference, March 2.

Acting president of the new association is Parker Shirling, manager of Princeton Turf Farm, Centerville, Md. Other temporary officers elected by about 65 persons at the organization's first meeting include: vice president, Winton Osborne, Harford Sod Co., Fallston; secretary, Dr. Elwyn Deal, turfgrass specialist, University of Maryland, College of Agriculture; and treasurer, Emory R. Patton of R. P. Patton and Sons, Silver Spring. Edward F. Mayne, Olney, Md., along with the temporary officers, made up the committee to study MPS formation.

Temporary officers conducted a scheduled meeting May 17, where a proposed constitution and bylaws were presented.

Aims of the MSPA are to cooperate with the University of Maryland in an education program, and to develop close working relationship with the building industry in Maryland, and with turfgrass associations in other states.

Salt-Tolerant Grasses Eyed for Roadside Use

Three coarse-textured grasses show considerable promise for roadside use where stand establishment is made difficult by high salt concentrations in the soil, reports a turfgrass specialist from Iowa State University.

Grass specialist Eliot Roberts says Kentucky 31 fescue, sand lovegrass, and blue grama have been most tolerant of high salt concentrations. Six other coarse-textured grasses also show promise for establishing cover quickly on salt-contaminated soil, Roberts adds. They are intermediate wheatgrass, Russian wildrye, slender wheatgrass, tall

wheatgrass, western wheatgrass and reed canarygrass.

Roberts explains that failure to establish grass stands along roadsides is becoming a serious economic problem. Lack of adequate cover leads to erosion and causes undermining of highway medians and underslopes.

In most cases, the grass is killed by high amounts of salt carried from highways by runoff water. The salt then becomes concentrated in the soil. During the past two winters, Roberts notes, as much as 50,000 lbs. of salt have been used per mile on some sections of 4-lane highways in Iowa. He points out that road beautification suffers as a result.

As a part of a study sponsored by the Iowa Highway Commission, Roberts is testing 23 more varieties of coarse- and fine-textured grasses for salt tolerance. Co-operating in the project is Edward Zybura, agronomy graduate assistant at Iowa State University.

N. M. Horticulturist Says Clip Often for Hearty Turf

An important part of any good lawn maintenance program is the decision to mow frequently, reminds Douglas Bryant, horticulturist with New Mexico State University Cooperative Extension Service.

Infrequent clipping, he says, allows grass to grow so much that any later mowing removes too much leaf surface. Bryant suggests that never more than 1/4 to 1/3 of the total leaf surface should be removed at one mowing.

To cut larger amounts of leaf surface results in physiological shock to grass plants. Bryant points out, "this causes excessive graying or browning of leaf tips and reduces the photosynthetic production of food and depletion of root reserves."

Another reminder Bryant advances to lawn care specialists concerns the value of prompt clippings removal. "Clippings left on a mowed lawn give disease organisms and insects an opportunity to attack," he explains.