

# Sodman

## Leases

## Land

**A** FLORIDA sod producer has built a sizable business by leasing farm land and adapting local grass as a lawn turf. He is Jimmy E. Anderson of Ft. Myers, Florida. He markets 125,000 square feet weekly and operates practically the year around.

Ideally, Anderson leases existing grass acreage, fertilizes, irrigates, mows, and generally builds up the grass over a 2-month period. Then he lifts the sod for use at Ft. Myers and adjacent areas.

With this system Anderson avoids the high investment which land ownership in his area of Florida demands. His capital outlay is restricted to equipment, fertilizers, chemicals, and overhead. He normally keeps a 15-man crew on his payroll, some being paid on a piecework basis. Anderson, himself, serves as general manager, sales representative and trouble shooter for the entire operation.

Anderson has been operating his business 6 years. His background consists of youth on a Texas farm, education at a liberal arts college, and sales jobs including Fuller Brush, encyclopedia sales, and Singer Sewing Machine Company. His first experience in the sod business was as crew chief for a landscape gardener laying sod on home lawns. Later he sold sodding jobs and finally decided that oppor-



**Jimmy E. Anderson, right,** owner of Anderson Sod Company at Ft. Myers, Fla., discusses day's operation with John Cannady, longtime employe of the company. Anderson is equipped to cut, move, and lay 40,000 square feet of sod daily.



# and Adapts Local Grass

A WTT staff report based on an interview with Jimmy E. Anderson, owner of Anderson Sod Company, Ft. Myers, Florida.

tunity for him lay in the production end of the sod industry.

Since going into business for himself, he has literally educated himself on the fine points of Argentine Bahia, the local grass he has adapted as a lawn turf in the area. Besides reading anything and everything available on the subject, Anderson has kept in close communication with university researchers and become active in the Florida Turf-Grass Association. Even more important, he carefully studies his own sod. He uses a carefully kept ledger to plot new cultural practices. The ledger includes dates of leasing, seeding, rainfall, fertilizing, mowing, and final lifting. His treatment of local Bahiagrass in preparation for lifting and sale has practically made it a special Anderson Sod Company grass.

## Bahiagrasses Thrive On Dry, Sandy Soils

Argentine Bahia is one of several Florida varieties of Bahiagrass, all of which thrive on droughty, sandy soils of low fertility. The Argentine variety has a wide leaf blade, a dark green color, and is not as upright in growth as the Pensacola Bahia. Other varieties of Bahia (*Paspalum notatum*) are Wilmington and Paraguay, seed of all being available.

Bahiagrass is a South American native which has proved itself in the Florida Gulf area as

a grazing grass and which is moving inland in nearby states. It is a densely tufted grass with virile underground stems. Leaves are broad and succulent and stands are hardy. Anderson says his experience during the past few years has proved to him that it is a serviceable lawn grass. Little research at the college level has been done on the grass, recognition to date being nil.

However, the American lawn has become the true grass testing

institution. That turf which adapts to an area and proves adequate as a lawn grass, even though it be a weed or strictly a pasture grass in another area or utilized another way, becomes a valuable asset. Anderson's experience proves the point.

Land leasing for sod production is possible in Florida because of the unique nature of agriculture in the area. Nematodes, disease, and fungus force operators to turn land back to

**Forklifts are used** to load palletted sod on truck at site. A twin unit is maintained at the unloading site to keep the operation mechanized. Anderson estimates that each pallet weighs about 3500 pounds.





**Ryan sod cutter** is used to cut sand soil-based sod into 1'x2'x1" strips for loading on pallets. Checking out cutter is David Pipkins, field foreman.



**Pallets are loaded** on a piecework basis at \$1.25 per pallet. Typical of crew members is Marion Brown, above, who can load 40 pallets in a good day.

sod every 3 years. Normally the sod is grazed for a few years, the acreage then going back into intensive cultivation.

Many times, land will be cleared and leveled for truck or other crops. The normal cultural practices necessary for intensive cropping include leveling of the land which makes it ideal for a follow-up sod crop.

Because normal practice fol-

lowing heavy cropping is to turn the land to grass, Anderson is in position to lease a regular supply of 2- and 3-year-old sod, which is the period needed for Argentine Bahia to develop into a useable lawn grass. The arrangement is mutually profitable to Anderson and the farm owner or operator.

Anderson prefers to lease mature sod, since seeding costs in this area of Florida run about

\$70 per acre, and the grass crop has to be maintained over a 3-year period. However, he has leased and seeded but finds it advantageous not to have to carry the financing on seeding over the long period. Normally, he finds plenty of sod land available for leasing and averages 600 to 700 acres under lease at any given time.

Land for sod production is leased by Anderson within a 65-mile radius of Ft. Myers. He has various sources regarding available sod but a prime one is spotting grass by air. His June bill for a chartered airplane used in spotting listed 50 hours of time over the previous 60 days.

Once potential sod is spotted from the air, Anderson returns with truck and sod cutter. If sod is as good as it previously appeared from the air, he tests the soil base with the sod cutter to see if the sand base will hold together for cutting and handling. If so, he explores the possibility of leasing. Anderson prefers to lease by the square foot, but sometimes leases by the acre.

When a grass stand is leased, Anderson decides when he will need the sod. During a 2-month period prior to lifting, he mows, fertilizes, and gives the grass the utmost in care. This includes sweeping up all mower clippings

**During 2-month period** prior to lifting, sod is fertilized, irrigated, and mowed on a regular basis. Final mowing just prior to lifting is made at 3½" height. Clippings are picked up by a vacuum sweeper unit designed by Anderson.





with a specially built blower of his own design. Sod is extensively irrigated during this 60-day period, being lifted after final mowing at a 3½-inch height.

#### **Irrigation Water Needed On Lease Land**

One of the prime requisites of lease land is that wells be available to provide irrigation water. Anderson owns a 2-mile Rainbird overhead irrigation system which he purchased from Anchor Brass and Irrigation at Wooster, Ohio. In some cases he has leased a good stand of sod when irrigation water was not available. Such grass stands have been prepared during the rainy season and sod moved into retail channels at that time. His usual practice is to handle sod from low areas during the dry winter period. Sod on higher land is moved during the summer or wet weather period.

For lifting sod, Anderson uses a Ryan sod cutter, cutting sod into 1'x2'x1" strips. These are stacked on pallets and lifted onto trucks by use of a forklift. With \$15,000 tied up in a trailer truck, he finds it poor economy to keep the truck in the field or at the unloading site more than the 30 minutes needed to load or unload. A twin model of the John Deere forklift is maintained at the unloading site which keeps the operation mechanized on both ends.

During the first 4 years in



Telephone in panel truck permits Anderson to keep in touch with operation at all times. Downtime is kept to a minimum and delivery schedules coordinated.

business, Anderson wholesaled his sod to landscapers. Because of various problems, he has since gone into the retail business and not only sells each job, but has his own crew lay the sod. He still supplies some sod to major landscapers on a contract basis.

Major problems of wholesaling was with financing. Too many landscapers were not turf specialists. Landscapers who operate without adequate financing were often unable to pay for the sod after it was delivered and laid. Others underbid jobs and failed to order enough sod to complete the job. In these instances, Anderson found it necessary to make good their shortages.

Normally his wholesale sod is sold at 2½ cents per square foot. Retail prices which include fertilizing, leveling, and laying of sod average about 7 cents per square foot.

Anderson notes that his operation is unlike that of many sod producers in Florida. A number of varieties of sod are used for various purposes and to fit several areas. While his Bahiagrass is grown on a sand base, this contrasts to several other types. The primary St. augustine grasses, Bitter Blue and Floratine, are grown on muck soils and are seeded much the same as Merion bluegrass in the northern US areas. Like Merion, these sods can be lifted the same season in which they are seeded.

Bahiagrass which has become popular in the southern Gulf coastal region is a low-maintenance turf. It is deep rooted and stands dry weather well. It is also resistant to a number of insects and diseases and thus of value to the homeowner, though it does need periodic spraying and fertilizing.

Like many sod producers, because sod production as it exists today is a new industry, Anderson is still experimenting with cultural practices, methods of handling, and sales procedures. In 6 years, he has proved to be a sound businessman who has developed a local market based on leasing sod acreage and using local, readily available grass.

### *Reprints Available*

## **Survey on Turfgrass Management Training Series**

WEEDS TREES AND TURF magazine is making available its series on Turfgrass Management Training which ran earlier this year. This series listed college level training available at 26 colleges and universities across the nation.

A number of universities have requested reprints for use with their own student counseling programs and for use by high school counselors.

If these can be used in your state, contact WTT. Because such information on training can help in informing prospective students about the industry, WTT is making these available at the reprint cost. Cost per thousand for the 10-page reprint will be \$30, plus shipping. Lesser amounts can be ordered at \$5 per hundred, plus postage.

**For reprints, write:**

**WEEDS TREES AND TURF  
1900 Euclid Ave.  
Cleveland, Ohio 44115**