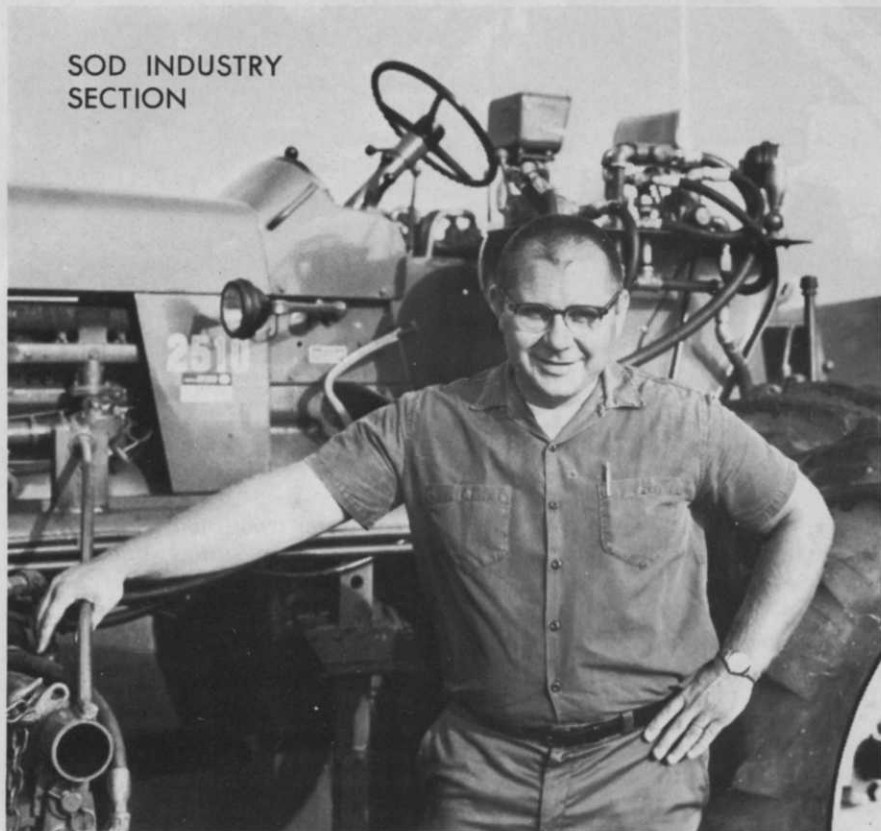


SOD INDUSTRY SECTION



Donald W. Morrill

'Here's What You Need To Start a Sod Farm'

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MY VIEWS on developing a new sod farm are based on experience in the Chicago market, after working to develop three farms within the past dozen years.

Three principles are essential: management, site and market, and resources. I list them in order of importance to me.

Foremost, I think a person must really analyze himself before entering this business. As owner/operator qualifications:

1. *Feel a genuine love for this kind of business (to the extent that you realize the occasional need of living with it 24 hours a day).*

This is a manufacturing business unlike general farming. You can't

just plant it and forget it. There are always problems — nature changes, labor, marketing, trucking, etc.

It takes a love for the game to get you through the rough spots.

2. *Be capable of assuming the responsibilities of running a business.*

As I said, this is not quite like farming; it's a business with special complications.

3. *Experience in sod is essential.*

I worked for another sod grower for five years. This is the minimum experience I would recommend.

4. *Sales and marketing experience is valuable.*

My selling experience was with Swift and Company; but any selling or related experience will prove to be profitable later on.

5. *You must have management ability.*

It will be necessary for you to be able to set up a budget, make the

best use of labor, money, land and equipment. You'll need to know how to weigh investment against return; analyze consumer credit; and so on.

A turf farm manager must be a people motivator. He must be able to get his personnel to do what he wants them to do and exactly the way he wants them to do it. Teaching and training is what we need to do . . . not just order jobs done without ever explaining why.

Site and Market

Assuming you meet all these qualifications, let's consider site and market.

Today, 96% of the U.S. population lives in cities; the rest in rural areas. This means we must locate near the heavily populated areas.

Personally, I would not want to locate in any area that did not have a minimum population of 500,000 within a 50-mile radius.

One reason is that the distance from your market is a direct ratio to the number of loads you can haul per day and also is a yardstick to how many trucks are required.

Equally important is to avoid an area already saturated with existing or expanding sod farms. Examples are Detroit, Chicago and Milwaukee.

Let's presume you are entering the sod business to sell sod and not using it as a cover to speculate in real estate. In this situation, you will not want to sit right on the edge of a large city. Among reasons are to avoid rising property taxes, changing zoning laws, and complicated water problems, such as contamination and availability.

Let's place our model sod farm on a state highway. This location is accessible year-round; it provides good visual advertising; and in most areas it will exempt you from the frost laws that might tie up secondary roads during early spring harvesting.

The site should have adequate, clean water. Do not under rate the necessity of water. Check the average annual precipitation. Make sure an adequate supply falls during your growing season.

I would hate to figure on irrigating more than half of my requirements.

Check alternate sources of water — ponds, streams, rivers, and wells (check the water table depths to assure you can get enough volume).

I wouldn't consider a farm without putting down a test well first. In my area, we need a minimum of

CLAY

Advantages:

1. Doesn't blow.
2. You may dormant seed.
3. Good water-holding capacity.
4. Holds plant food for longer periods.
5. You can load trucks in the field.

Disadvantages:

1. Slow for root development.
2. Sod, when wet, is heavy.
3. Subject to cracking during drought.
4. Hard to work.
5. Water penetration is slow when dry.

Soil-Type Characteristics

MUCK OR PEAT

Advantages:

1. Sod grows like crazy.
2. Good water-holding capacity.
3. Holds plant food well.
4. Sales appeal.
5. Lightweight sod.

Disadvantages:

1. Blows.
2. Can't load in the field.
3. Subject to flood conditions.

SANDY LOAM

Advantages:

1. Easy to work.
2. Doesn't crack.
3. Enables good root development.
4. Absorbs water easily
5. Can load trucks in the field.

Disadvantages:

1. Blows.
2. Doesn't hold fertilizer.
3. Doesn't hold water well.
4. More susceptible to disease.

1000 gallons per minute for every 160 acres.

Consider drainage. This is almost as important as water itself. You must be able to get rid of excess water before extensive damage is done.

One of the major growers reported \$450,000 flood damage not too many years ago.

There are several ways to drain land—natural drainage, field tile, ditches, or pumps.

Last on my list of site requirements is soil type. Sod can be grown on almost any type of soil and in most cases successfully.

I would recommend that you choose a soil relatively free of stones.

There are three soil types I am familiar with—Clay, sandy loam, and muck or peat type. My personal reactions on each are described in the chart.

Resources

Concerning resources, a major grower told me this story several years ago: They had just sold their first yard of sod off a particular 200-acre plot. He figured this yard of sod cost about \$250,000 above capital investment (land and equipment).

After 10 years of inflation, I would estimate the same 200 acres would cost upward of \$300,000.

Add that amount to your first two years of living expenses while you're waiting to market yard No. 1 and you'll come close to your financial needs.

With some of this money, you must buy equipment... which I look upon as a necessary evil. Because our business is seasonal, the invested dollar in equipment is at the

bottom according to its return when compared with other expenses.

Steel mills work 24 hours a day, seven days a week just to make equipment pay. I just can't get excited over owning a lot of equipment, especially if I can lease it cheaper and write it off as expense.

We do own all the equipment we feel we need to function properly, but we still take off the plow to put on the disk.

Proper servicing of your machinery can double its life, and I'm a great believer in this. Don't misunderstand. We mechanize whenever and wherever we can profitably.

Incidentally, we hire all of our trucking.

When you're investing, spend some of that money for good men—ones that you can train to do your kind of job. Most of my men have shifted into their own niches automatically; those that haven't, don't stay. With diversified duties, each man can share responsibility, yet be a part of a team effort.

For about 600 acres, I have seven full-time men (pay ranges from \$700 to \$1300 per month, with hos-

pitalization and income protection furnished) for an 11 to 11½ month year. We use about 15 seasonal employees. For migrant workers, we furnish modern housing, stoves, refrigerators, hot water, showers, laundry rooms with washers. We pay above average salaries for the industry.

Another note: The best return for your dollar spent is on a good accountant.

In summary, what makes a good sod farm?

GOOD LOCATION: Within 50 miles of several large cities, on a state highway, flat, square, well-drained, with water supply (and preferably on muck).

SPECIAL EQUIPMENT: Wheel-move irrigation is our answer to proper watering. It's time-saving, labor-saving and does the job right. Mechanized harvesting is a must for survival. We have cut, rolled, and loaded mechanically for five years; and whenever we find a better way, we'll switch.

GOOD PRODUCT: Don't knock it! Nothing sells like a good product. It's worth more time, more money, more effort.

AMERICAN SOD PRODUCERS ASSOCIATION

invites your participation

If you are a Sod Grower you should be a member of ASPA.

Keep in touch with progress.

Allied Industries are welcome.

For More Details Circle (106) on Reply Card