



Charles Jensen is having a hard time keeping up with his advertising program, one that's primarily word of mouth, but . . .

## Pennsylvanian Finds

# Sod More Profitable Than Beef

By PHIL LANCE  
Philadelphia, Pa.

**S**IX YEARS AGO, Charles J. Jensen farmed four acres of sod. Today, he cultivates better than 375 acres and is getting ready to farm more.

"It just grew like topsy," said this Lansdale, Pa., sod producer. "For more than 25 years, my father and I ran a feedlot for cattle and pigs. However, the area's high taxation, labor shortage and housing developments made it more difficult and continually less profitable to remain in the business. So, we looked around for a switch.

"We wanted something we felt had a future, something that was currently needed and would be needed even more with passing time. Since we had been doing a little bit of business all the time selling pasture sod, we decided to try sod growing. That was six years ago, and we are sorry we didn't start sooner."

Jensen's four acres of Eastern States velvet green mixture went quickly. It sold through word-of-mouth. Jensen figured that if four

acres could move without any "selling" on his part, that he was certainly not going to overlook any further opportunities in sod growing.

Currently, his own farm covers 142 acres. His son-in-law's acreage plus additional leased farmland brings it up to 375 acres. To meet the demands of his customers, he cultivates several varieties that have proved popular in the Delaware Valley area.

Jensen's sod business has now become a family enterprise. Charles Jensen is assisted by his son Lars and his wife Ellen, who answers the telephone, does the bookkeeping and handles all the paper work. She claims her husband is too busy growing sod and does not like to handle paper work. This, therefore, has become her job.

Son-in-law Phil Gehret works closely with the family. Other help includes three year-round employees and several more during the season.

"Some customers specify the type of sod they want and others just want something nice," Jensen said. "That is why we have several varieties. Where possible, we ask them to determine the type of sod they already have or to bring us a small sample. We can then match it up with the sod that will blend in with the shade of their grass.

"In general, we have found that our variety, which includes 100% Merion, a mixture of Merion and Kentucky bluegrass, a mixture of Merion, Kentucky bluegrass and Pennlawn, K-31 and our four varieties of Kentucky bluegrass just about covers the needs and requirements of our customers.

"Personally, we are quite partial to Merion because we find that the rolls hold together more firmly.

"We try to produce the highest

quality sod in the varieties that we feature, considering each sale an advertisement for the next."

### Expands with Mechanization

After the second year of sod growing, Jensen, realizing he had a good thing going, started irrigating. He drilled a 400-foot well and began filling two ponds. One covering an acre was already on his property, and the other of more than an acre, he dug out. As he discovered that equipment and automation helped him realize a more profitable business, he continued to expand.

"We sold off a few acres of ground for a highway that was coming through and had some money to



Irrigation water comes from two ponds backed up by a 400-ft. well.



... bigger equipment has increased volume — and profits.

work with," Jensen said. "We also began to take an interest in association activities and struck a close relationship with researchers from Penn State University. Everything helped. Like topsy, the business began to boom."

Listings in several telephone directories throughout the Delaware Valley, through word-of-mouth and satisfied users, all increase demand for Jensen's sod. Industrial parks, schools, institutions, etc, supplemented the demand by homeowners and others. A free delivery service proved helpful and Jensen has made deliveries to customers as far as 150 miles away.

#### Stays Close to Customer

"We still do not have any salesmen and really don't intend to put any on until we expand production," Jensen continued.

"We want to be in as close a contact with our customers as we can. When they know they are doing business with the sod grower himself, they have greater confidence in him and will make repeated purchases.

"Local builders who have purchased from us and are now constructing properties hundreds of miles away are still depending upon us for their sod. When we make deliveries in these areas, others learn about us and this results in subsequent demands for our sod."

While there has been some competition, Jensen has not found this to have affected his business too much. He produces a quality sod, advises and helps his customers as much as possible, and his own enthusiasm about his quality products radiates to his customers.

Jensen's sod is generally between two and three years old before be-

ing sold. The older the sod, the better it holds together. Seeding starts in mid-August and usually continues up to early September.

Other than broadleaf and some clover, Jensen claims that he has been blessed with sod that has a minimum of weeds. He uses Amchem LV-4 and finds that a single application rids him of this problem.

"We simply don't have enough of a broadleaf weed problem to require a post emergence spray," he

said, "and we only fertilize as we find our needs demand. We use a half-ton of 20-10-10 per acre at time of seeding which we get from Agway. A bulk spreader is used for limestone, and we top with nitrogen as needed."

A Ryan sod harvester is Jensen's latest equipment addition. He also has five Ryan sod cutters that roll one foot and 18-inch wide rolls, also three Brillion seeders and a John Beane sprayer. His reel type F-10 Jacobsen mowers cover 50 acres a day and have proved to be extremely versatile.

"Equipment doesn't cost — it pays," claimed the enthusiastic Jensen. "Sure, it may be a little difficult to raise the money to buy this equipment to begin with, but once you acquire it, it pays for itself. One man can seed up to 50 acres of sod per day, the harvester can cut and roll thousands of yards of sod per day, and the gangs that can be lifted hydraulically on our mower has saved a lot of time and effort.

"We are certainly sold on the importance of modern equipment. Because of this, we are continually reinvesting what we are taking out in order to gain more."

# AT LAST A MACHINE TO HARVEST SOD



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