SOD INDUSTRY SECTION

Consider Thin Cut Sod

Depth at which sod is cut is an important factor affecting the productive life of a sod field, the rate of establishment, the ease of handling, transporting and laying, and the economics of sod production, says John R. Hall, turf specialist, University of Maryland. Proper cutting thickness will vary depending on species, soil texture, sod density, and the amount of root and rhizome development.

No sod farm has an infinite topsoil depth, he says. Therefore, the length of life of every sod farm is a function of the number of harvests and the depth of those harvests. Simple mathematics indicate that cutting sod at a three-fourths inch cutting depth instead of a one and one-half inch cutting depth almost doubles the life of a sod farm.

Research indicates that thin-cut sods have better rooting ability than thick-cut sods. Merion Kentucky Bluegrass sod cut at a one-half inch depth gives increased rates of root appearance, increased root density, and greater rooting depth compared with one inch and one and one-half inch cutting depths, the specialist points out. For tall-fescue-Kentucky bluegrass mixtures, three-fourth inch sod cutting depths are more favorable than one and one-fourth inch cutting depths.

The increased weight created by the excessive cutting depth increases the frequency of harvesting machine breakdowns. Some of the sod handling machines produced today are not being built to work with thick sod day after day. Sod producers can generally rely on repair costs increasing linearly with the thickness of sod, Hall says.

Thick sod increases the probability of overload fines for the transporters. The weight of one and one-fourth inch sod is about 175 tons per acre, while three-fourth inch sod weighs only 100 tons per acre. The heavier sod means that fewer pallets constitute a load, and often what would normally be considered a load turns into an overload. Overload fines in the State of Maryland are currently assessed at the rate of two cents a pound for the first 5,000 pounds over six cents a pound for any amount greater than 5,000. The cost can be considerable.

The increased work caused by the extra weight has been protested by sod workers. They don't enjoy lifting an extra 75 tons of weight to cover an acre of ground.

Hall says the economic soundness of giving away topsoil is questionable. Selling one and one-fourth inch sod for the same price as one-half inch sod is simply giving the buyer about 108 cubic yards of topsoil. The current price of sterilized topsoil delivered less than 20 miles is about $4.50 per cubic yard. This means the purchaser of one and one-fourth inch sod is getting about $485 worth of topsoil for every acre of sod he buys.

Thin-cut sod is generally best in every situation. However, age, density, and species of the sod, soil texture, moisture, and site preparation are going to have an effect on the final decision of cutting depth. Where site preparation is poor, fertility management programs are deficient, and the laid sod is not going to get ample watering, it is possible that thicker sod might be beneficial. Thick sod can never correct poor management practices, however, in most cases thin-cut sod is superior to thick-cut sod, concludes Hall.