

Commercial Sod Industry

Virginia's Turfgrass Industry

"You've Come A Long Way Baby"

GLANCING at a turfgrass program dated August 1957, Virginia Tech agronomist John F. Shoulders smiled broadly as if to say, "You've come a long way baby."

The "baby" in this case is Virginia's turfgrass industry which just was beginning to be recognized back in 1957 as an agricultural industry. Exact figures are unavailable for that year but estimates place the acreage of all turf at about 200,000 with a gross value of about \$40 million, Shoulders said.

Today, that "baby" is growing fast. The turf industry, based on the most recent figures compiled by the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Commerce, presently includes 618,000 acres under cultivation with income at \$524 million annually.

"That's nearly as much acreage as there is in corn in Virginia," mused Shoulders, an associate professor of agronomy and Extension turf specialist who joined Tech faculty in 1952. Also working as a specialist in the turf program is A. J. Powell Jr., associate professor, who completed his graduate work at Tech in 1966 and returned to the campus in 1971.

Shoulders and Powell talked about the 19th annual Turfgrass Field Days and Trade Show recently held at the University. Since its inception, the event has grown from fewer than 50 participants to almost 300 at the 1975 program.

Traditionally held on the campus in September, the event this year was held in the spring instead, to beat the summer rush to the golf greens managed by many of the golf course superintendents for whom the program is designed to assist. The Tech agronomists also wanted to show the effect of the spring stress on grass.

Another change that the agronomists noted in this year's turfgrass program was the expansion of the traditional exhibit of turf equipment and materials into a

trade show, featuring the latest in professional turf machinery and materials by some 20 companies.

To accommodate the trade show, the event was moved from the Turfgrass Research Center to nearby Lane Stadium, where Virginia Tech football is the usual fare.

The field days continued their tradition of tours of experiments in progress on turfgrass species and varieties, fertilization, herbicides, fungicides, and other work involving turf management practices, the turf specialists said.

The field days combined with the trade show making the event one of the few within a 300-mile radius where professional turf growers and managers can find the latest in turf equipment and materials "under one roof," Shoulders said.

Special efforts were made this year to attract certain groups who have not traditionally attended the field days, and these efforts paid off in a higher attendance of commercial lawn people and agricultural workers who make lawn recommendations.

"People are becoming more interested in high quality turf than ever before," commented Shoulders. "These people include home-

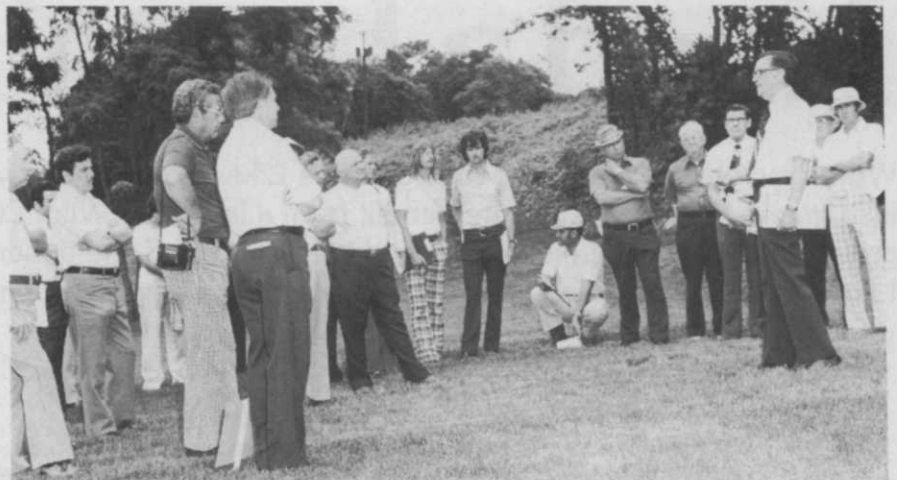
owners as well as professional turfgrass managers," he said.

Looking ahead 20 years, the two turf specialists see a lucrative turf industry for Virginia. Evidence of this optimism is apparent at Tech, where in 1969 a Turfgrass Research Center was opened with strong support from the Virginia Turfgrass Council and area turf organizations. R. E. "Dick" Smith, associate professor of agronomy at Tech, directs the center.

The state's turf organizations, Shoulders said, are investing in the state's turf future not only through the center but through annual scholarships to Tech graduate students in agronomy as well.

Each year along about January, Virginia's turfgrass and sod producers get together with Tech agronomists to compare notes and to map strategies for the future. The next of these meetings will be Jan. 28-29 at Fredericksburg, Shoulders said.

For now, both Shoulders and Powell are confident that turfgrass will continue to be a growing industry in Virginia and that the annual Tech Turfgrass Field Days and Trade Show will reflect this growth. □



Houston B. Couch (right with clipboard), professor of plant pathology and physiology at Virginia Tech, discusses turfgrass disease control with participants in the 19th annual affair.



A comparatively smaller mowing unit, capable of close mowing around trees was among several units displayed by the 23 exhibitors at Tech's 19th Turfgrass Field Days and Trade Show.



This large mowing unit was demonstrated before the 300 people attending the show. Tech's Lane Stadium is in the background.



A turf supplier (left) describes his products for two turfgrass managers attending the show on the Blacksburg campus.

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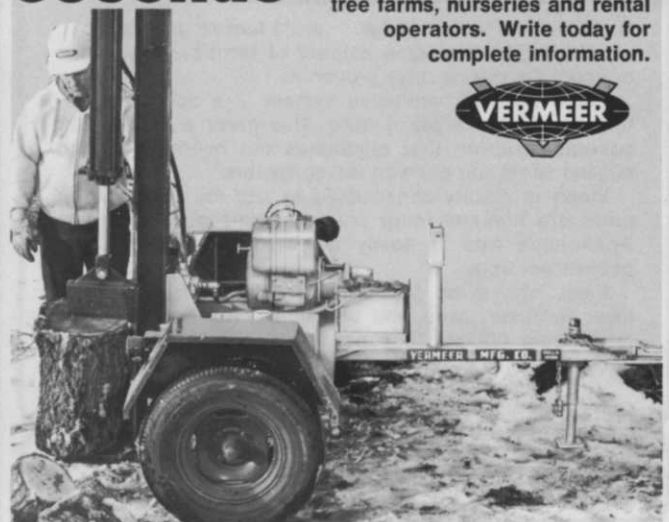
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