

KEY IS EFFICIENCY

Long Island sod producer uses pragmatism to adjust to current market trends

By Ann Reilly



Efficiency of McGovern's equipment is a principle concern.

You know it's spring on Long Island when the boom trucks carrying pallets of sod roll down the Long Island Expressway.

Chances are strong that McGovern Sod will be lettered onto many of those trucks, and that they will be headed to Shea Stadium, West Point, or a cemetery, park, landscape contractor or retail garden center somewhere in metropolitan New York City, New Jersey, Connecticut or Long Island.

McGovern has been selling sod since the turn of the century when James McGovern cut old pastures and golf courses for sale to the residents in Brooklyn. McGovern's first farm of 15 acres was purchased in 1936 and the operation has increased over the years to its present 600 acres in three locations (Melville, Calverton and Mt. Sinai) on Long Island.

Like many sod farmers, the McGovern's bought and sold land, moving outward to new locations as the population multiplied, and constantly tried

Ann Reilly is Executive Director of the New York State Turfgrass Association and the Mailorder Association of Nurserymen. She lives on Long Island.

to upgrade the operation. Expansion became possible through successful real estate transactions and the production of the highest possible quality sod due to Long Island's ideal soil structure and water percolation and good climatic conditions. Today McGovern Sod Farms owns 60% of its

land and leases the remaining 40%. Cousins and partners Richard T. and Edward C. McGovern operate McGovern Sod Farms today, a far cry from the business started by their grandfather over eight decades ago.

Dick McGovern considers the efficiency of his operation to be primary. His grandfather no doubt ever envisioned today's mechanization, irrigation equipment, regular programs of fungicide, insecticide and herbicide controls available, radio controlled operations between the field, the office and the trucks, and deliveries within 24 hours.

The trend in the sod growing industry in recent years has been to increase efficiency since it is an industry with high capital investments in mechanization. Since the early 70's, the development of modern harvesting equipment has lowered manual requirements from 15 men to five men to do the same job and has eliminated hand stacking. McGovern's crews harvest an average of 5,000 sq. ft. per hour per machine allowing for down time; the harvesting equipment can actually cut and stack 6- to 7-thousand sq. ft. an



Dick McGovern, left, and dispatcher Tom Hunt.

hour at peak efficiency. This figure converts to a trailerload an hour for every two harvesters.

The industry has itself to thank for its innovations, for it is the sod growers themselves that have invented and manufactured their new equipment. The 13-gang mowers that cut McGovern's fields are the largest available in the industry and used almost exclusively by sod growers. Big rolls, 48-inches wide and 50-feet long, have been developed for large scale sod laying operations.

Although improvements in technology have definitely increased the efficiency of the sod growing operation, McGovern doesn't foresee it reaching the point of computerization. "It's an eyeball business," he explains. Sod fields are visually studied every day, and something additional is usually found that needs to be done. Studies were done to set up irrigation parameters, for example, but it was found that there were too many soil differences, too much variance in temperature to make it work.

McGovern's crews harvest an average of 5,000 square feet per hour per machine, allowing for down time.

McGovern's sod fields are generally fertilized three times a year, with the type of fertilizer varying with the age of the turf. A 1-2-1 ratio, 50% organic fertilizer is used at seeding time and on young turf, with a switch to a 16-8-8 for mature stands. If visual inspection reveals that a fourth application is necessary, it is done.

Turf is mowed on a regular schedule but this again can vary with rainfall and heat. Cutting height is set at 1 1/4 inches in spring and raised to 1 5/8 inches about the first of June. If it becomes very hot in summer, height can be increased to as much as two inches, but McGovern explains that this is not necessarily desirable since long grass invites fungus diseases. While mature sod is cut every three to four days, sod ready to be harvested is cut every day or two, again based on physical inspection. If it's too long, it doesn't stack properly.

New turfgrass varieties and hybrids have also been a boon to the sod grower, since they contribute attributes

such as disease resistance, faster establishment rate, seedling, vigor, darker color or earlier greening-up. Varieties grown at McGovern are primarily bluegrass and include Adelphi, A-34, Touchdown, Eclipse and Ram I, with the tendency being away from non-bluegrass shade mixtures in very recent years.

Like many other segments of the Green Industry, the sod farming operations on a national level, especially

the smaller farms, have been hurt by recent economic times and the decline in new construction. This downward trend has, however, started to turn around already, and McGovern expects it to be back on level course by late this year to next spring. With 70% of the members of the American Sod Producers Association farming on 200 acres or less, one would not be surprised that the industry felt the effects hard and saw some diversification to

Forecast
Easing
Spring
Chores

★ EXTRA ★

Forecast
Peace of
Mind
Fertilizing

Milorganite ... America's Foremost Naturally Organic Fertilizer

Milorganite® Solid thinking when thinking of solids

MILORGANITE is a Proven, Natural Organic Turf Food that will fit into your Lawn Service Program.

- Slow nitrogen release is based on activity by soil microorganisms. They work at the same temperatures and moisture levels which encourage grass growth — no more, no less.
- There are no soluble salts in Milorganite so it cannot burn the turf. "Watering in" is not necessary.
- Early winter applications stay in place, waiting for soil warmup in spring. This frees you for other early spring operations. The Milorganite will be ready to go when the grass is ready to grow.

- Spreader calibration is easy, because Milorganite is bulky. Just set any spreader wide open to apply 1 to 1 1/2 lbs. of actual nitrogen per 1,000 sq. ft. depending on walking speed.
- Over 60 distributors assure nationwide availability.

AND BEST OF ALL Milorganite promotes excellent turfgrass color and density wherever you may be. This has been proven in service to the turf industry since 1926.



**MILWAUKEE METROPOLITAN
SEWERAGE DISTRICT**
735 N. Water Street
Milwaukee, WI 53202

Circle No. 126 on Reader Inquiry Card

other crops in some areas. That, too, is changing back at present. Long Island's sod business remained in healthier shape than the rest of the country's during the recession, primarily because of its microcosm of better economic conditions.

Even the healthy Long Island industry has seen some decline, however. The number of sod growers has decreased dramatically in the last dozen years from eleven to four, but the acre-

age has remained approximately the same or down only slightly to its current 2500 acres.

Dick McGovern's philosophy in keeping his operation strong is one of realism, pragmatism and adjustment to the market. He takes advantage of new innovations to the ultimate, keeping his eyes open and asking questions at meetings and of salesmen. The most important thing to him is to make a profit first, balancing the economics

and technical aspects of producing a quality product. He has a belief in the future which he feels he couldn't operate without.

McGovern got his sod growing experience on the job, and he feels it came hard to him without a technical background. His degree is in economics from Fordham University. Working "hands on" in the business and visiting other growers brought the necessary experience. If he were to start over again today, McGovern feels a university degree in agronomy would be a necessity.

In the last several years, McGovern has taken his "hands on" experience in sod production and sales and shared it with others by becoming highly involved in the turfgrass industry. He is a member of the Board of Directors and Conference Chairman for the New York State Turfgrass Association, member of the Research Committee of the American Sod Producers Association, member of the Nassau County Turf Advisory Committee and Chairman of the Suffolk County Agricultural Advisory Board. McGovern sees the role of associations as being a forum for disseminating information, bringing technical and legal problems to the forefront and dealing with them in a concerted effort, funding research and unifying divergent interests.

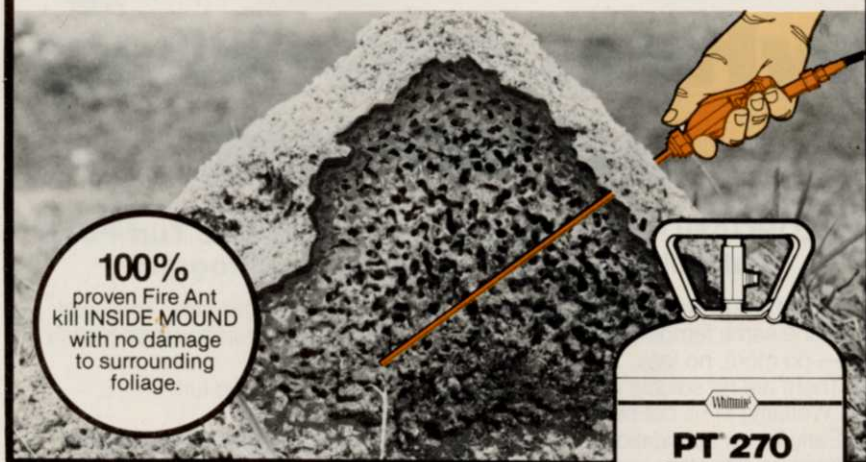
In hours "off duty" from McGovern Sod Farms and industry-related activities, Dick McGovern enjoys the many faceted life of his wife, three children, tennis, golf, weightlifting, traveling, wood-working, collecting fine wines and investing in real estate and the stock market.

Robert Russell of J. and L. Adikes, a close friend and fellow member of the turfgrass industry, sums up what makes McGovern the successful man he is. He says, "Dick McGovern is a product of the old school. He knows how to work when the need is there. As a youngster, before the age of mechanization, he learned the hard way from tough masters, his father and his uncle. He learned what it was like to get up at 4 a.m. be at the field at daybreak, and cut, pile and load by hand trailer after trailer of 12-inch squares.

"He has been meticulous about changing with the times and keeping abreast of new technology and knowledge concerning the requirements of today, needed to produce a first class, merchandisable piece of sod. Dick makes a point of knowing what is going on in his industry."

For your *fire ant* problem...

Whitmire® PT 270 Dursban* and New 12" Soil Injector



Here's how it works.

Dursban and solvents are forced deep into ant galleries with high pressure CO₂ propellant killing all ants by three methods.

1. CONTACT KILL The instant the spray contacts ants, they are stopped dead in their tracks by the vaporized PT 270 Dursban.

2. FUMIGATION KILL Toxic vapors of Dursban, CO₂ and evaporated solvents replace air in the mound anesthetizing and suffocating ants.

3. RESIDUAL KILL Returning ant foragers and any emerging stages will be killed by the long-lasting residual.

Designed for use in golf courses, parks, utilities, nurseries, and other outside locations.

Treat a fire ant mound effectively in less than 60 seconds.

Call the Distributor in your area...

B & G COMPANY
Dallas, TX • Tel. 214-357-5741

ESTES CHEMICAL CO.
Wichita Falls, TX • Tel. 817-766-0163
Offices in: Oklahoma City, OK,
Paris, TX, Waco, TX

FORSHAW CHEMICALS
Charlotte, NC • Tel. 704-372-6790

OLDHAM CHEMICAL CO.
Memphis, TN • Tel. 901-794-0084
Offices in: Birmingham, AL

SAVVY CHEMICAL CO.
Metairie, LA • Tel. 504-835-5926

SOUTHERN MILL CREEK PRODUCTS CO.
Tampa, FL • Tel. 813-626-2111
Offices in: Jacksonville, FL, Miami, FL,
Atlanta, GA, New Orleans, LA

STEPHENSON CHEMICAL CO
College Park, GA • Tel. 404-762-0194

THOMPSON-HAYWARD CHEMICALS
Atlanta, GA • Tel. 404-351-0654
Offices in: Tulsa, OK, Houston, TX

VAN WATERS & ROGERS
Houston, TX • Tel. 713-683-8371
Offices in: Dallas, TX, San Antonio, TX

WOODBURY CHEMICAL COMPANY
Princeton, FL • Tel. 305-247-0524

*DURSBAN Reg. Trademark Dow Chemical Corp.

Circle No. 138 on Reader Inquiry Card