winding two-lane can slip into a Norman Rockwell canvas of ripening corn and clusters of brickfront ranch homes with attached garages, every third or fourth one of these sporting a basketball backboard.

This is not, on first appearances anyway, prime lawn care country. But Brent Flory, a slender, handsome man whose boyish brown hair is graying at the temples, is building a tight little natural lawn care company around it.

Brent Flory is turning home lawns into his laboratory.

Delphi, Ind., a dot on the road map, is headquarters for his Freedom Lawn. But the company's market extends into Lafayette, home of Purdue University, about 20 miles to the southwest.

The residential lawns Freedom Lawns service are, in addition to being a business, Flory's laboratory. A self-described agriculturist, he's using Freedom Lawn to build a natural lawn care template for other lawn professionals. When he feels it's ready, he will market what he's learned.

The cornerstone of his efforts are the fertilizers he's developing. "We do put a great variety of materials into these mixes," says Flory.

He insists the lawns his company services compare well with chemically maintained lawns in about everything but weed control. Sometimes even that. "If the customer doesn't want to see a weed, he doesn't want my service," he says.

Freedom Lawn doesn't use chemical pesticides, but Flory doesn't make a big deal of it. Instead, he looks for an agronomic reason for a particular lawn problem. Failing that, he investigates and tests natural solutions.

Last fall he tried beneficial nematodes to counter grub infestations in client lawns. They worked well. Within several weeks the grubs had died.

This past spring Freedom Lawn used nematodes again, but control wasn't as predictable. "Some of the lawns did quite well, some of them got whipped up," says Flory. He says he will test milky spore for grub control also.

The Indiana businessman insists he's not anti-chemical. "I don't believe in that kind of hype," says Flory. "I don't think the commercial lawn care operator using chemicals is an enemy of mine."

Mark Miles, like Flory, comes from a farm background. And, like Flory, Miles entered the lawn care business, at least in part, to develop an alternative program for professional lawn care. He started Organic Lawn Care in 1986. (He still describes it as "a big experiment.") This past season it serviced 35 million square feet of lawns in and around Minneapolis, Minn.

Organic Lawn Care uses several natural fertilizers (which Miles helped develop himself), bio-activators, soluble humic acid, etc. It also sells these products to the professional market.

In fact, Miles' operation offers a complete alternative lawn care program package with training and marketing manuals, customer information, support literature, and products.

"We're not saying chemicals are taboo," says Miles. "But in many cases they're being used as a convenience and they're being used too much."

Miles admits that his company, Organic Lawn Care, *will* make a single herbicide application per property upon request of the property owner. "But we tell each customer we are not a weed-and-feed service. We'll spray the weed control only after they've agreed to help us fix the problem that caused the weeds." Similarly, company technicians may, on occasion in the spring, make spot applications of pendamethalin on particularly troublesome patches of crabgrass.

"The long-term solution is to find out what conditions are causing the crabgrass and then to correct these," says Miles.

"I'm not going to say what's pure. Who knows what's pure?," says Miles. "But, by the time a person buys the service from us, we've tried to identify all the good and bad points. They'll have an understanding of what's organic and what's not."

—Ron Hall

Turfgrass: It's not enough to be dwarf, you've gotta be tough, too

■ The search for turfgrasses that need fewer mowings and/or produce less clippings is at least 20 years old, likely older.

This quest invariably leads back to the subject of turfgrass dwarfness which researchers likewise have been seeking for at least 20 years. For example, Dr. Terry Riordan, now at the University of Nebraska, says dwarfness was one of the characteristics he sought in turfgrasses he worked on in Florida in 1970.

In fact, he said, one grass he refers to as a "no-mow bermudagrass" looked promising until it encountered stress. Then it died. It had little recuperative potential. Nematodes ravaged it.

"It would be nice to have a grass we don't have to mow as much but we still have to have some vigor from the plant," says Riordan.

That's the catch: the turfgrass plant that doesn't grow as high or as quickly (and doesn't replace its leaves as quickly or often) must also possess unusual agronomic vigor to survive in home lawns or on golf courses. With heightened concerns over pesticide issues, plant breeders also seek some level of pest tolerance from the plant. And they want turfgrasses that can compete against weeds.

No single variety of turfgrass can accomplish all this.

That's why plant breeders continually seek improvements in all varieties. Progress is exceedingly slow but steady.

Riordan, who has several turfgrass patents as a result of his research, says the work on dwarf tall fescues is particularly encouraging but far from over.

"Growers can see that they're dwarf because they don't grow as tall as other grasses in the field," says Riordan.

"But we really need to do a better job in finding out how these turfgrasses perform and how much clipping reduction we're going to get from them. We do not really have it well documented," he says.