

# Effective, efficient hydroseeding

BY CURT HARLER / CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

**These contractors have found the right mix of materials, prices and products to make hydroseeding services profitable**



**I**t's summer and business is heating up. So are the chances of your hydroseeder plugging. One problem might be failure to rinse out the hoses. A minute with the rinse tank can save hours of frustration.

"Clogged hoses can be a real mess," says Rob Childs, owner of Outside Unlimited, Meredith, NH. He's found that keeping tabs on the paper material carrying the seed can reduce the likelihood of clogging.

Childs does about 70% commercial hy-

droseeding, including new houses and shopping centers. Most of the residential work is around the upscale homes of the Lakes Region. A two-man hydroseeding crew follows the grounds team onto job sites.

John Goode, who operates Easy Lawn of Ohio Valley, Circleville, OH, recommends using a paper-based mulch, especially on the smaller units. "Paper absorbs all the water it is going to take up in about 10 minutes," he says. "Wood will keep absorbing water for an hour or more."

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— Wiggins



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Gaussoin, turfgrass specialist at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, says he has seen no difference.

"We tend to recommend newspaper fiber. It is cheap, readily available and decomposes more quickly than the wood-based product," Gaussoin says. Like many others, he has heard the concerns about wood chip-based materials tying up nitrogen.

"The theory is that the excess wood messes up the carbon-to-nitrogen ratio," he explains. However, he downplays the possibility. "Bark and wood-based carriers are not a problem. I personally don't think it is a concern. No research that I've seen points one way or the other."

At Twin Rivers Lawncare & Landscaping, Lexington, SC, owner Harold A. Wiggins, Jr. uses three or four different brands of wood-fiber carrier, depending on the job requirements. Their work is split about 50-50 between commercial and residential all around the state. However, most are upscale homes and developments, not highway work.

"We use some materials with dye built in and some that you can add on your own," Wiggins says.

Because his two Turbo Turf

hydroseeding systems do not have big internal agitators, he feels most comfortable with bagged material that comes loose. "That way you don't have to break it up," he notes.

"I like to use a combination of wood and paper," Childs says. "The wood fiber is good for erosion control, but too much wood can cause a problem. I like to see a 40-60 wood to paper mix." He uses a turf fiber mulch that is combined with a park and athletic seed mix, including bluegrass, fescue and rye. "It's designed so the bluegrass becomes the predominant variety."

"We recommend Jet Spray for all seed types," says Fesler. The material is a wood/cellulose/paper mix that meets all specifications for most cities and states. Fesler's company used to recommend mulch pellets. "They are compressed way too tight," he adds. "It's a good material designed for dry spread, not for hydroseeding."

The spray is more of a flake. "It has a good dye in it and you can get it mixed with starter fertilizer," Fesler adds.

Gaussoin says the "stickers" may be the more important concern. "It boils down to the emulsifiers used to get the uniform distribution required for the seed," he says.



Rob Childs moved to New Hampshire to start Outside Unlimited, a \$3- to \$4-million business offering hydroseeding for new residential properties and shopping centers.

### Doesn't need straw

At Outside Unlimited, Childs finds that his crew rarely has to use straw mulch. This is different from his experiences farther south. For 25 years, Childs worked in a family business in Annapolis, MD. About four years ago, he moved to New Hampshire to start Outside Unlimited, which now grosses \$3 to \$4 million a year.

"Hydroseeding is more successful in New England than in the mid-Atlantic," he says. "We rarely have to use straw mulch unless we're on a steep slope where erosion is a problem. And, germination rates are much higher."

He credits that to the cooler New England nights. "Also, we can use bluegrass here, not improved fescues. We get a better response with the bluegrass," he says. The firm uses an 1,100-gallon hydroseeding unit from Bowie Industries, Bowie, TX.

Goode says that hydroseed-

ing will be simpler in almost every case. The only time he recommends using straw is for jobs done at the end of the year. "Straw is a better insulator," he notes. "I'd hydroseed and then place some straw over it."

It was a run-in with straw that got Goode into hydroseeding in the first place. He had just finished seeding a new lawn and covering it with straw when a storm came and sent the straw onto nearby properties throughout the neighborhood. It took five men one day to rake the neighborhood; he had to put a mesh net down over the lawn and deal with the neighbors' complaints. He picked up the cost of the cleanup.

"I just got tired of messing with straw," he concludes. "For the amount of money I wasted on that job alone, I could have made a nice down payment on a hydroseeder."

Gaussoin maintains that hy-

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HydroTurf's hydroseeder has a new inductor system for agitation, offering an alternative to mechanical agitation. Various models on the market accommodate large and small seeding jobs.

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 dromulching can also be the difference between success and failure on any sloped or nonirrigated field. "In addition to the seed being wet, that extra bit of moisture can be the difference between success and failure," Gaussoin says.

He adds that the mulch crust helps stabilize sloped fields, preventing erosion where a mesh is not used.

#### Sizing units

If you are considering a hydroseeder, size the equipment to the workload. A landscaper who is doing one home a day or a couple a week probably can get by with a 300-gal. unit.

"However, I've seen many come back and say they wish they'd gotten a 500-gal. unit," Fesler says.

If you do a lot of restoration work, big lawns, or the equivalent of 5,000 to 10,000 sq. ft. a day, look at 500 gallons or larger. A 750 will probably be suited to such an operation, Fesler says.

Goode's rule of thumb is that anyone doing 10 acres or more should go with a 900-gal. unit. A unit with a 900- to 1,000-gal. capacity will do about 10,000 to 12,000 sq. ft. per tankful.

He figures the cost of hydroseeding — including the materials, cost of labor, gasoline and equipment depreciation — in the area of 1.5 to two cents per sq. ft.

Wiggins is happy with his 500-gal. units. "Most of our jobs are two or three acres," he explains. "We keep a 500-gal. unit busy. If we need to run two

units, we call in another."

Much of the work Wiggins does is between fancy homes and around tight spots. He is proud of the custom-designed and custom-built trailers made in his own shop.

"The trailers were custom made to fit the hydroseeders so the unit does not hang out over the side. Those trailers are really versatile and mobile when we have to run them between buildings," he notes.

A typical seeding mix is centipede mixed with carpetgrass. "The centipede takes a long time to germinate. The carpetgrass provides quick cover and the centipede takes over," Wiggins explains.

They also are one of the few companies to hydroseed zoysia-grass. They use Zenith zoysia-grass and have been successful

pumping it onto landscapes.

Gaussoin says the size of the seed used (such as fescue versus bluegrass) is not a factor in choosing a carrier. "As long as the carrier lends itself to even distribution, it is not an issue," he says.

Battles over the benefits of jet or mechanical agitation continue to rage. Manufacturers of each have a litany of arguments why their process is better than others'.

Goode opted for jet agitation over paddles because he preferred a poly tank over steel and wanted to keep the mechanics and maintenance as simple as possible.

"Both systems work," Goode says. "It depends more on the individual manufacturer and the model of the machine."

"The price is not that much more than standard seeding," Gaussoin says, "but the better chance of success alone justifies the extra cost of hydroseeding."

— The author is a contributing editor of *Landscape Management* and managing editor of *TurfGrass Trends*.

"You've got 500 gallons of solution in your tank and a 20-minute drive between jobs. In 90-degree weather, that's all it takes for the hose to get plugged."

— Fesler