



Turf farms growing business in state

Arkansas' 58 sod growers cultivate nearly 9,000 acres, up to \$30 million

BY NANCY COLE ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

SEARCY — George Friedrich never goes anywhere without a canister of weedkiller.

As a certified turf farmer, he constantly strives to produce pure grass varieties, but he can't ignore marketing, labor management and customer service.

"I wear a lot of different hats," said Friedrich, whose Double Springs Grass Farms Inc. near Searcy currently has 1,400 acres under cultivation, producing primarily Bermuda and zoysia grasses for golf courses and athletic fields as well as residential and commercial developments.

Friedrich is part of a significant yet often overlooked segment of U.S. agriculture.

The United States has an estimated 50 million acres of "managed turf" — which includes golf courses, athletic fields and parks — plus more than 21 million acres of private lawns, according to Turfgrass Producers International, an industry trade group based in suburban Chicago. That compares with about 90 million acres of corn, 67 million acres of soybeans and 60 million acres of wheat that U.S. farmers were expected to plant this year.

In 2002, Arkansas had 58 sod farms with nearly 9,000 acres under cultivation, according to the latest Census of Agriculture. Nationwide, there were 2,124 sod farms with 386,504 acres under cultivation.

Mike Richardson, one of three full-time turf specialists at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, estimates that Arkansas farms sell \$20 million to \$30 million worth of sod each year. Nationwide, more than \$1 billion of sod is sold annually, according to Turfgrass Producers International.

The major grasses produced in Arkansas include several warmseason varieties — Bermuda, zoysia, centipede and St. Augustine — and one cool-season variety, tall fescue, said Aaron Patton, a turf specialist with the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service. Bermuda and zoysia varieties alone account for about 97 percent of all of the state's turf production, he said.

Because sod prices depend in large part upon how quickly a farmer can harvest the grass, zoysia varieties tend to be more expensive than Bermuda varieties, Patton said. While a farmer may be able to cut two Bermuda crops in one year, one zoysia crop normally takes at least a year to prepare for harvest, he said.

Although the first references to turf date to 12th-century Japan, the U.S. industry "really blossomed after World War II," said Jim Novak, a spokesman for Turfgrass Producers International. The biggest increase in sod production occurred in the mid-1950s and early 1960s, he said.

During that era, former Gov. Winthrop Rockefeller established what was probably Arkansas' first turf farm, just west of Little Rock, Richardson said. Since then, sod use nationwide has grown with the housing market and the associated recreational market created by schools, city parks, golf courses and sports fields, he said.

A major reason for sod's popularity is its ability to quickly minimize erosion and runoff, Richardson said.

"Sod really does provide a very environmentally sound way to stabilize developing areas," he said.

Rodger Pevehouse, a partner in Supreme Sod Inc. of Van Buren, said his company has targeted the construction market in Northwest Arkansas. Supreme Sod produces and sells three Bermuda-grass varieties that are inexpensive and hardy, Pevehouse said. "I'm staying with the old basics," he said of his 125-acre sod farm.

Quail Valley Farms Inc. of Little Rock has a much broader focus, owner Roger Gravis said. The 900-acre farm counts golf courses as its most important market, he said.

"A typical order for a golf course could be 40 or 50 square acres [of sod] for just fairways and tees," he said, compared with less than two acres for a football field and less than a half-acre for a typical yard.

Within the golf-course segment, potential customers include not only Arkansas' approximately 200 golf courses, Gravis said, but courses nationwide and overseas. Quail Valley has developed a special method to wash soil from grass sprigs so they can be shipped internationally, he said.

Golf-course superintendents select sod based upon a number of factors, Gravis said, including water use, fertility requirements, ability to withstand traffic, ease of maintenance, disease susceptibility and playing quality.

Producing high-quality turf for such demanding customers requires both labor- and capitalintensive operations, Richardson said.

Double Springs, for example, employs more than 70 people, relies upon extensive irrigation systems and uses a fleet of specialized equipment that includes seven mowers, nine sod harvesters, 15 tractor-trailers and 19 forklifts.

The vertically integrated business grows a perishable product that it harvests, packs, ships and, in many cases, installs.

"We take the product from the field to the end-user, whoever that might be," Friedrich said.



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/STEVE KEESEE Workers at the Double Springs Grass Farms in White County harvest rolls of Bermuda grass earlier this month.



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/STEVE KEESEE George Friedrich, owner of Double Springs Grass Farms, carries a square of bermuda that his crew harvested earlier this month.

Top turf states

The United States had 2,124 sod farms in 2002 that cultivated 386,504 acres for the production of turf. Arkansas' farms produce primarily Bermuda and zoysia grasses.

Rank	Number of farms	Number of acres
1. Florida	235	67,370
2. Texas	205	38,341
3. Alabama	96	25,805
4. Georgia	92	24,653
5. Oklahoma	95	17,846
6. California	62	15,909
7. Minnesota	89	14,564
8. South Carolina	27	14,027
9. New Jersey	53	12,485
10. North Carolina	87	10,952
11. Michigan	54	10,262
12. Ohio	62	9,434
13. Arkansas	58	8,998
14. Tennessee	56	8,419
15. Illinois	40	7,994
TOTAL	2,124	386,504

SOURCE: USDA, 2002 Census of Agriculture

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