

Turf

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The two brothers are able to share some tillage equipment, and quite often are able to rotate potatoes and turf.

If it's grown right, there's not much that can hurt a good field of sod. "Hail won't hurt it," Hummer said. "It can be flooded for 27 days and still survive. The only thing that can really cause any damage is heavy rain right after seeding. I've been growing sod here for six years, and I've never had to reseed. But I did lose one field to Agnes."

A turf farmer is very busy for about five months out of the year. April, May and June are the biggest selling months. There's another

spurt in October and November, after it gets too late in the year for builders to plant grass seed. In a good growing year, some of the sod that's planted in the spring can be harvested in the fall of the same year.

The machine that cuts the sod cuts the roots off about a quarter inch below the soil surface, leaving a thick, carpet-like mat. While some topsoil is removed with each crop, Hummer feels that the soil is being built up at least as fast as the topsoil is removed. "We only take the top part of the plant," he explained. "The roots go down a foot or more, though, and they stay in. I think the soil tilth is actually improved because we're adding a lot of organic matter to the soil."

Sod can only be harvested when it's cool, which means

early morning and late afternoon during the warmest part of the year. In the busy season, Hummer finds himself on the go from 6:30 in the morning until 6:30 or later in the evening.

Turf's biggest competitor, at least locally, is the seeding market. That, Hummer said, is mostly because people don't understand sod. "They think it's expensive. But if you consider it over the long run, it's really no more expensive than seeding. With sod, you get a good grass cover right away, and it's 100-percent Kentucky bluegrass. You don't have any weeds, so there's no spraying cost. The land isn't subject to erosion when it's covered with sod, and the customer gets the instant beauty and coolness of grass. If you compare the costs of sod and seeding in the first two years, sod really isn't any more expensive."

Locally, most of the sod that is planted is used for erosion control. Hummer feels the state's tightened stream laws will probably open up new markets for turf growers.

Hummer's market area extends in roughly a 100-mile radius from his farm, but goes mostly north and west. Competition is very rough in the Philadelphia area because of the many large turf growers in that area and

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The biggest cost factor in turf farming is the labor involved in harvesting. Although there is a special machine to cut the crop away

from the soil, it must still be picked up and loaded onto wooden pallets by hand.

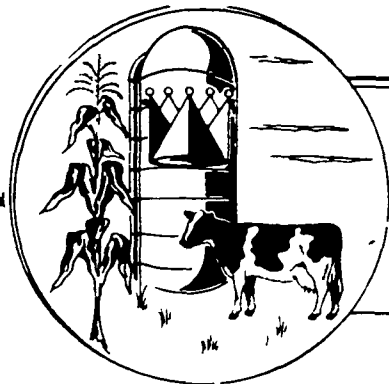
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