

# Wilmot builds empire out of sod

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GAITHERSBURG, Md. — The grass is always greener at Summit Hall Turf Farm.

Summit Hall was the nation's first commercial turf farm, today encompassing over a thousand acres cropped to a carpet of green velvet destined to become golf courses, athletic fields and picturesque lawns.

Founder of the innovative sod operation is William Wilmot, who says he's "just a town boy from Bethesda." But in the mid 1940's, this town boy entrepreneur took an old farm homestead, whose white colonial home was once commandeered during the Civil War by General Jubil Early and his Confederate troops, and on its acres pioneered the Maryland turf cropping industry.

"There was no such thing as turf production in those days," says Wilmot in his gentle southern drawl. "The small quantities of sod that were used came from a dairy or sheep farm, where a particular strip of pasture that was extra lush and thick happened to catch a landscaper's eye. Sheep pastures made especially good quality sod, because all the little hoofs would tamp the sod tightly and their close grazing made the top thick."

After World War II, Wilmot returned to Maryland, following a period of employment on a western ranch, and became involved in helping establish an acre of sod that had been donated by landscapers to beautify the grounds of the Montgomery County Fair.

His ranch experience had taught Wilmot that beef was scarce, and the price high, following the war, and an idea clicked in his thoughts. Why not raise turf grasses in rotation with pasturing beef cattle?

Wilmot began hunting area golf courses, not with a bag of clubs slung on his back, but instead seeking information from the greenskeepers on the best types of grasses for putting greens and fairways.

He also spent hours at the turf gardens planted by scientists at the USDA's Research Center at Beltsville, Maryland. There he gathered information on improved golf course species, like U-3 Bermuda, and creeping bentgrasses, which had been developed from outstanding German parent strains and could be manicured into excellent golf putting greens.

Summit Hall established itself as a turf precedent setter when the firm became the first handler of Merion bluegrass sod.

Wilmot had become acquainted

with Joe Valentine, the greens keeper at the Merion Cricket Club, outside Philadelphia, and learned of a lush strain of grass that performed well in hot weather. Penn State turf researcher, Dr. Bert Musser, also took an interest in the promising bluegrass and began using it in testing studies.

Through the interest of these men Merion bluegrass, named in honor of the site where the parent strains had been found, became a standard of quality to measure bluegrass. Wilmot credits Penn State and its turf researchers for continuing as forerunners in the industry.

In 1950, being the only real commercial growers of turf grasses, Summit Hall was able to obtain half of the hundred pounds of precious seed of the new bluegrass strain. It became the backbone of Summit Hall's business.

"We weren't — and still aren't — that interested in being big, just better," has been the philosophy of Wilmot and his Summit Hall firm. That insistence on quality has earned Summit Hall some rather unusual business contacts.

For instance, in 1953 a complete renovation of the White House and its surrounding grounds was underway. While then - President Harry Truman moved temporarily to the Blair House so the White House interiors could be redecorated, Summit Hall turf crews were called in to change the mansion's patchy grass into a solid, thick green lawn.

Greening the nation's capital didn't stop at the edge of the White House lawn. Park Service officials

called back for Summit Hall to roll out sod at the Capitol, around the Lincoln Memorial, at Arlington National Cemetery. Wilmot's grasses also beautify the Washington, D.C. embassies of Germany, Pakistan, and Portugal, as well as numerous country clubs, amusement parks and industry headquarters.

It was while he was studying turf plots at Beltsville, in 1948, that William Wilmot first heard of Meyer Zoysia grass.

A hardy perennial, Zoysia was discovered in Korea in 1904 by government researcher Frank Meyer, who brought the first sample plants to the United States. Zoysia forms a tight, compact turf, highly resistant to heat, and retains its lush, carpet-like cushion feel even when it turns tan with cold weather dormancy.

Zoysia is a vegetative grass, rejuvenating itself from sprigs, or plugs, and doesn't reproduce true to seed. In 1948, Wilmot obtained a scarce bushel-basket supply of the first Zoysia sprigs released by USDA and planted them in a patch at the Gaithersburg farm.

Today, Summit Hall is known as the "Home of Meyer Z-52 Zoysia, the plug-in grass." Millions of homeowners across the nation purchase the living grass plugs from mail-order ads in garden publications and newspapers, and Zoysia sod is also available for immediate lawn covering, all tracing back to those first sprigs of the grass Wilmot obtained in 1948.

In the early 1950's, the nation was recuperating from the post-war years and homeowners were taking an interest in property



From an isolated waterfowl refuge area along the Potomac River valley sprouts the unexpected sign welcoming visitors to the Potomac Valley farm of the Summit Hill turf operation.

beautification. A fluke promotional incident put Summit Hall's Meyer Z-52 Zoysia plugs before a nationwide audience of lawn growers looking for a tough, easy-to-care-for grass.

"The Arthur Godfrey Show" was just beginning its slide from the top of the fledgling television industry's ratings. In April of 1954,

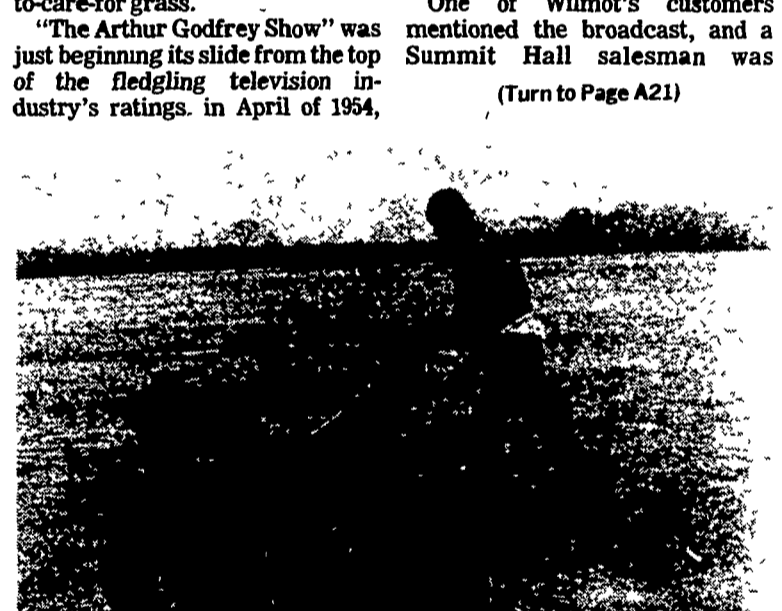
when members of the program's regular singing group, "The Mariners," lamented on the air one day their frustration with growing lawns of crabgrass.

One of Wilmot's customers mentioned the broadcast, and a Summit Hall salesman was

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Instant lawn? Frank Wilmot examines strips of bluegrass freshly harvested and field stacked for shipment to retail garden and landscape centers in Washington, D.C. and Baltimore.



Ryan turf cutting machines remove 15-inch wide strips of sod with a sharp knife that neatly slices a half-inch of root system off the top of the soil. At set intervals, depending on customer orders, the machine will also cut the sod strip to convenient lengths.



A turf harvester gently picks the sod lengths up on a chain conveyor while crew members pack the pieces of living carpet into stacks for mechanical loading.



Stacks of turf, like so many blocks or bricks, go from field to transport by forklift.