

ZD2872, has 28 horsepower and a six-foot-wide deck. It can knock down five acres an hour--more even. It starts at \$12,600. It wasn't that long ago you could buy a car for that amount of money. Heck, the even bigger four-wheel drive front deck mowers that can double as snowplows or blowers in the winter start at \$18,000. The Orange County Public School System has a dozen of them.

Or how about the four-wheel drive compact tractors featuring a belly mower, a Category One, three-point hitch and PTO, and a front-end loader. You can do everything from till your garden to scrape your driveway, to mow your lawn with one machine.

If you don't think we're lawn crazy yet, look at all the lawn maintenance services that have sprung up over the past 10 years or so. "That's something that's gotten huge around here because you can get into it fairly reasonably. You can come buy a trailer and a zero turn and a weed-eater, you can be in the lawn mowing business for \$15,000 or less," observes Phillip. A check of the latest issue of the Yellow Book shows 29 separate listings offering "Lawn and Grounds Maintenance."

Why, just the other day, a guy who owns a local lawn maintenance company walked into Haynes and bought three zero-turn mowers and 10 weed-eaters. He'll replace them all in three years; he's that busy. And at \$50-\$80 per hour per unit (mower or weed-eater), "It's a big business," says Roberts. Haynes keeps on hand \$2 million worth of lawn care equipment at any given time. They'll turn that inventory completely over two and a half times a season.

Asked if he has any lawn maintenance tips for the average homeowner, Phillip Roberts recommends you aerate your lawn in the spring and fall, religiously. He prefers core-type aerators "that actually pull plugs of soil out and that lets the rainwater and seed and fertilizer in the ground, and it loosens the soil up as well." His other recommendation is to fertilize in the fall, not the spring, "cause



Photo by Phil Audibert
Phillip Roberts stands among just some of the lawn maintenance inventory at Haynes Outdoors in Orange. Note the zero-turn mowers in the foreground and the compact tractors in the background.

that's when your roots grow, is during the winter."

Of course there's a down side to all that fertilizer we put on our lawns. "They talk about the farmer has ruined the Chesapeake Bay," snorts Phillip. "It's the homeowner more than the farmer, especially if you go in the city, because you've got an acre of yard to concentrate on and all that water (and fertilizer) that runs off of that is going down the drain right out to the rivers and the bay." He shrugs, "But everyone wants their yard pretty and green."

And of course to keep your lawn pretty and green, you should spray for broadleaf weeds and root-eating grubs, who by the way are the chief diet of that mole that

just burrowed a tunnel through your beautiful yard. "Get rid of the grubs, you'll get rid of the moles," advises Phillip. There's even a product called Weed and Feed. It comes in liquid or granular form. While killing broadleaf weeds, it's fertilizing your lawn. Hmm. An herbicide fertilizer--that seems like a contradiction in terms.

During the growing season, Phillip recommends you mow your lawn to a height of three inches. "You cut it too low you're going to burn your grass up." He also says, "You want to cut your lawn at least once a week if not more--if you wait too long you get so much thatch, it'll kill the grass underneath of it."

So what do you need? A lawnmower, a weed-eater, an aerator, a fertilizer spreader, a de-thatcher, edger, backpack blower? "We should be your one-stop shop," smiles Phillip Roberts. Why, they even have "striping kits." Those are rollers that attach to the back of your lawnmower "so as they're mowing it bends the grass one way, like ballfields and stuff."

And how about this? A robot lawnmower. Husqvarna puts one out--17-inch cut, not recommended for anything more than a half acre, and it should be activated to do its thing at least twice a week. Phillip explains that it docks to a battery-charging station. You can program when you want the unit to work, let's say Tuesday at 8 p.m. "When Tuesday night 8 o'clock rolls around, it backs up and starts mowing, by itself, just like a pool cleaner, and it goes all over the place, and when it bumps into a tree, it stops, backs up and turns around and starts mowing everywhere else."

The device recognizes its own boundary by a buried cable, much like an invisible dog fence. And when it senses its battery is low, it has the sense to dock itself for a recharge before it totally runs out of energy. And one more thing. If someone steals it, once it crosses its invisible fence it screams bloody murder!

Have they sold any at Haynes? "None," replies Phillip good-naturedly. "It's more of a conversation piece."

Welcome April rain squalls move in towards the Somerset Seed and Sod farm. So far, rainfall has only partly quenched the thirst of turfgrass that was planted during a dry fall and awoke from its winter sleep to the driest March on record.

Photo by Phil Audibert



Photo by Phil Audibert
William Scott operates the sod-cutting machine at Somerset Seed and Sod's Jacksonville area farm as another employee mows established turfgrass in the background. Note the checkerboard pattern left by the 22-foot rotary mower.

Mark Hutchison has a view to die for from his front porch. In the background are the Blue Ridge Mountains; in the middle ground, the foothills and patchwork fields and farms of the Virginia Piedmont, and in the foreground... his office... a sea of emerald green grass. Too bad when he

gets up in the morning, sometimes all he sees is worry and work.

"I don't see dollar signs," says Hutchison ruefully as he and his brother Andy survey their relatively new agricultural enterprise, Somerset Seed and Sod. He points to their 90-acre turfgrass farm near Jacksonville. "We started this

in 2002 during the drought of the century. Last year we had massive hurricanes after planting. It's an expensive crop to get established. We would benefit greatly from a normal year, but we haven't had normal years recently in weather patterns. Yeah, there's plenty of worries in agriculture whether it's turfgrass or con-

ventional farming." It could be 2006 AD or BC, agriculture still boils down to soil, sunshine and rainfall. And this spring in particular, with the driest March on record, rainfall is the biggest worry of all. The spring drought has put Somerset Seed and Sod about a month behind harvesting its crop of 24" by 60"

Instant lawn

INSIDER

BY
PHIL AUDIBERT
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Brothers Mark (left) and Andy Hutchison stand next to the \$200,000 sod harvesting machine that can cut, roll, and stack on pallets more than 10,000 square feet of sod per hour. The machine has boosted production and cut labor costs.

Photo by Phil Audibert



rolls of sod that will someday become somebody's instant lawn.

It's interesting that these two brothers, raised on a traditional Orange County farm, graduates of OCHS, and college educated at Virginia Tech (Mark), and NC State (Andy) in Ag Economics and Animal Science, respectively, have carved out this specialty niche here. "From my perspective," continues Mark, "since I live right across the road, it's a way for us, who grew up on a farm, to stay involved in agriculture which is our first love...to make payments on some real estate and try to preserve that for future generations and in the meantime have a way to provide the cash flow to pay for it and also to provide a service and hopefully make a profit."

The sod business is more complicated than it looks. It is definitely not as simple as throwing down grass seed, waiting for it to come up, and then digging it up. The process is rife with detail, expense, timing, preparation and, yes, when it comes to weather, luck.

Planting sod is best done in the fall, but that really means mid-August to Labor Day...right at the height of the hurricane season. "Fall seeding means the first of September for optimum results," says Mark. They will have already disked in the cover crop that held the soil over the summer months, fertilized, and gone over the

ground with a variety of implements to bust up clods.

"That seed right there is sod-quality seed," says Andy pointing to several pallets loaded with 50-pound bags. "You can't go to the co-op and buy this seed. That is the best seed available." It is actually a highly specialized blend of four fescue and two bluegrass varieties. Mark explains, "Most people prefer to have fescue, and the bluegrass provides the netting. Basically bluegrass is what holds the roll together. Bluegrass roots, they run and tie and knit it all together. Fescue is one root straight down."

After seeding, the Hutchison brothers issue their first of many prayers for rain. "Pray for the right kind of rain," corrects Andy, which means a steady inch a week,

The harvesting machine gently cuts and lifts 24" by 60" sections of sod, rolls them up and stacks them on pallets. Once cut, the sod should be installed the same day and watered regularly for two weeks to become established lawn. Most of the sod produced here will find a home in new residential developments.

Photo by Phil Audibert



not a six-inch downpour or six inches between drops such as we experienced last month. Once established they will mow the new sod a few times before the grass goes into winter dormancy. Early in the spring they top-dress with fertilizer, spray insecticide if needed, and control the odd broadleaf weed that came in on the wind or with the turkey litter they put down.

During the height of the growing season, they will mow with a 22-foot wide rotary mower, twice per week. "and we always go in an opposite direction," points out Andy. "If we mow north to south today, three days from now we'll go east to west. It cuts down on the tracks. You don't want to see a pattern. If you run that mower the same way every time, then you're going to have tire tracks and the whole field of grass will lay the same way."

It can take as few as eight months or as many as 18 for a turfgrass crop to mature. "A lot of our sod is planted in the fall and harvested the following fall, or the next spring," explains Mark. On average, they have one crop every year. If they use netting to hold the sod together, the time lag can be shortened to eight or nine months.

To harvest sod, the Hutchisons use a \$200,000 machine that Rube Goldberg could have invented. "That is the latest in sod harvesting equipment," says Andy. When they added the machine to their line-up, "our harvesting operation went from three or four men down to two, and the production went up."

The machine delicately digs up surprisingly thin five-foot long, two-foot wide strips of sod, carefully rolls them up and

stacks them one way then another on a pallet. The machine can cut 100 pallets per day. A pallet holds 54 rolls, each roll representing 10 square feet of lawn.

The Hutchisons' primary customer is the landscape contractor who will take the freshly cut sod and install it, typically in new residential developments. The Hutchisons will also sell directly to homeowners.

You can come pick it up yourself or have it delivered; it all depends on how many square feet of bare ground you want covered with living carpet. Either way, a cut roll can survive 24 hours in summer; a little longer in spring; but Mark cautions, "It should go down the day it's harvested."

And that's basically it. The contractors roll out the two-foot by five-foot sections like carpet. "After installation, they should water it during the summer months, an inch a week for the first couple of weeks until it gets

to the point that you can grab a hold of that sod and you can't lift it up off the ground, which indicates that the roots have taken hold," explains Andy. "Instant lawn," observes Mark "and that's what people want. We're born in the Fed Ex society...no patience. They want it now."

In comparison, a homeowner may take as much as two to three years to establish a yard from scratch with seed. With sod it can take two to three weeks! "The key, I think, is to plant in the fall. A lot of these new houses coming on line, they're not set up to have the yard planted in the fall; they need it now," says Mark.

"Ten years ago this wouldn't have been a viable option in this area because the growth wouldn't support it," continues

Mark. "A lot of the sod typically was grown in Northern Virginia around metropolitan areas, and some of that land is getting squeezed out so the sod producers don't have anywhere to go." He pauses and adds, "So we provide a service for the Charlottesville and the expanding areas around Orange County...all the areas that are experiencing growth."

And so here's an example where residential growth and a farming operation actually rely on and support each other. "We've developed our clientele with basically no advertising. It's all been word of mouth and quality and service is what built our business," says Andy, adding that they have been reluctant to sell all their inventory to just one customer, like a golf course, "and cut all those guys (regular customers) short."

"We're developing the market and working with new people all the time

and the market seems to dictate that we expand," continues Mark.

In addition to the 90 acres they farm near Jacksontown, they have another 42 at Liberty Mills. And they are looking to grow further. "Some of our expansion may be here; some of it may be closer to the areas that are requiring sod. We don't want to give any farmers or neighbors (the impression) that we're making boatloads of money because we're in the same situation they are," points out Mark. "There's a huge initial investment. It's a farming operation that's sensitive to the weather. There's risk involved. It can be profitable. It's not profitable on the short term but over the long haul it can be profitable. Is it a slam dunk? No."



Photo by Phil Audibert

The Hutchison brothers (Andy left, Mark right) stand in a sod field that was harvested this past winter. In early March it was planted in oats as a cover crop. If we'd had normal rainfall in March instead of the driest March on record, these oats would be knee high by now.



Everyone wants their yard pretty and green

Photo by Phil Audibert

Husqvarna puts out a 17-inch cut, battery-powered "robot" lawnmower that can be programmed to randomly mow your lawn at any time of day or night. It is not recommended for lawns more than a half acre in size. None have sold locally, but Phillip Roberts says they are popular in urban areas.

Twenty two years ago, Phillip Roberts went to work for Harold Young selling and servicing Ford and Kubota farm equipment. "When I first went to work for Mr. Young, farming was number one," says Phillip from his office at Haynes Outdoors, on Route 15 just south of Orange. "We sold a few lawnmowers."

Phillip looks out over the sea of orange Kubota and Husqvarna lawnmowers and compact tractors in the Haynes front lot. "But in the last ten years, we've really seen a drastic change. We don't handle hay

equipment because number one we don't have the room for it and number two, there's far fewer farmers out there to fight over. That's why we concentrate on the small farm-ette. We cater to them."

It's yet another indicator that Orange is changing from a rural farming community to a residential one. Fully 75 percent of Haynes' business is the selling and maintenance of lawn equipment.

Take the nifty zero-turn lawnmower, where you sit right over the deck and, using hydraulic control

levers, can spin on a dime. Five years ago you couldn't find one for less than \$10,000. Today, there's an economy version for \$3,100. And they're selling like hotcakes. "The zero-turn lawnmower has made the standard mower obsolete," says Phillip. "People are working longer now, the wife and husband both work, they don't have time to put five or six hours into mowing grass. What they'll do is buy a zero-turn and what took them five hours to cut their grass they can do in two."

The top of the line Kubota Zero Turn, the