

All Grass, All The Time

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Pennsylvania grower comes up with the perfect blend for any application

Charlie Fitzgerald is a grass man. He can grow any kind of grass. He will put it in a home lawn, a school's athletic field or a horse pasture. He's known around Pennsylvania as the man who will come up with the best seed blend for your turfgrass situation, whether it is to be played on by kids or eaten by horses.



The company uses
midsized tractors to
run various tillage,
aeration and mowing
equipment

*Photos by Charlie
Fitzgerald.*

The owner of Grass Management, Inc. in Coatesville, Fitzgerald grew up on a Pennsylvania farm, got into the lawn mowing business and found that he loved growing grass, and now has a company of six employees devoted almost solely to that task in several counties west of Philadelphia.

Surprisingly, horse pastures are a significant source of business for the company. Fitzgerald will blend varieties like perennial ryegrass, non-endophyte fescue, orchard grasses, timothy and bluegrass to produce a pasture that is not only comfortable for horses to run on, but also good to eat.

"That's a pretty aggressive mix," Fitzgerald says of the pasture blend, and that is out of necessity. Generally, once he gets an order for a pasture, the owner wants the grasses to emerge quickly. It's important to get a stand of grass up as soon as possible, because once the horses are turned out onto the field, their hooves and teeth take a quick toll. If you think soccer teams can chew up a field, look at what shod horse hooves and/or overgrazing can do to a pasture where there are "too many horses and not enough grass." He used to blend all of his own seed, but a commercial company has adopted his mix and now he just buys it.

Ironically, a horse pasture is established with much the same methodology that Fitzgerald uses to install turfgrass on an athletic field or lawn grasses in a front yard. However, athletic fields, which comprise about half of the company's workload, will usually be based on Kentucky bluegrass in this area. Each field, designed for different sports such as baseball and soccer, may have a slightly different blend.

"Some of this depends on how long it has to grow in," Fitzgerald notes. For example, if a field is established in the spring and is destined for hard use in the fall, some perennial ryegrass will be mixed in so that quick establishment will allow the field to absorb that use before the bluegrass has had time to send down a deep root system. He will install either seed or sod, depending on how quickly the client wants his grass established. He says that by the time the turf is mature, however, the cost of sod and seeding jobs are about the same (he has sodded a horse pasture at the request of a client).

Home lawns are another common job for Grass Management. Kentucky bluegrass, fescue and perennial ryegrass are the usual blend here. It is not customary for the company to do a complete landscaping job, but it can be done if necessary. Fitzgerald's stepson is a landscape architect, and the company can handle a job from start to finish, especially if it is mostly grass. Planting trees and shrubs is a job that his experienced crew can do, but Fitzgerald sees the benefits of working with other companies, such as landscapers and contractors, to do part of the work while his company focuses on the grass. He's spent a lot of energy over his 25 years in business sorting out competent companies he can work with in order to accomplish large jobs such as football stadiums.

A subset of his residential lawn business is installing or renovating the grass on large estates, some as large as 60 acres. Depending on the requirements of the property, he will plant a blend of Kentucky bluegrass, tall or fine fescues and perennial ryegrass. The company also has an active maintenance function, and on these large properties will utilize John Deere wide-area mowers to keep down the growth.

Much of Fitzgerald's focus, whether installing new turfgrass or renovating a declining field, is the soil. He declares that this is the universal element of any type of grass facility and must be attended to before the grass itself goes in. Soil testing is imperative, because every field will have its own needs, and he often favors a topdressing of organic fertilizers and other amendments followed by core aeration or whatever tillage is called for.

"Even on our home lawns, that's what we do. When we've got that soil working we're OK," Fitzgerald points out. This is particularly important on township park lands or school district fields where years of overuse and neglect have left severe deficiencies in the soil. He likes to get those fields on a good soil amendment and maintenance program. If the grass roots won't go down, the lawns are left even more vulnerable in times of economic hardship when funding (and maintenance) is reduced. A lawn that has good soil and is growing grass with good root development can weather that neglect, and there is also less fungal disease.



Grass Management, Inc. includes horse pastures in its repertoire of turfgrass projects.

With this kind of diversity in his work, Fitzgerald has to have a lot of equipment on hand. He likes to own his equipment, but will work with other companies on jobs requiring specialized units such as large excavation machinery. That also buys him a more experienced operator. He will buy new or used equipment as opportunity arises, focusing on mid-sized tractors that can attach a variety of tools at the three-point hitch.

"We can put any kind of implement on there we need," he says. He buys tractors in the 30 to 60-hp range, and can attach everything from an aerator to tillage equipment. He also keeps some walk-behind equipment like small mowers and an aerator for use in confined spaces such as backyards.

Fitzgerald says that his business has been steady for the last five or six years, and the Grass Management reputation for quality and diverse work has enabled him to keep up volume, while at the same time being selective. He is in a position where he will even refuse work if it can't be done efficiently or is outside his zone of expertise.

"After you've been in business for a while, you learn that you can't do it all," he says, and he aims to keep his company on an even keel. He has gone with the demands of his geographical area and guided the company toward the kind of work that opens up here while still utilizing his expertise and personal interests. As a consequence, he has all the work he needs with almost no advertising.

Still, that work is all aimed at one central aspect: growing grass. "It's just what I found I was good at," Fitzgerald says.

Don Dale resides in Altadena, Calif., and is a frequent contributor to *Turf*. He has covered the green industry for more than 10 years.