

# Business at Bramer Sod Farms



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## Diversifying operations key to success

Mike Bramer grows sod in a complex, broad-based sod operation based in Louisville, Ky. The family-owned and operated Bramer Sod Farms, Inc. is owned by Bramer and his wife Donna. The company currently grows about 300 acres of Kentucky bluegrass, fescue and a fescue-bluegrass mix, with most of the growing locations in Shelby County, about halfway between Louisville and Lexington, with the business serving both markets. The business has evolved during Bramer's approximately 30 years in the sod industry, with Bramer citing diversification as a major element of success in the sod business in today's contracted sod market where residential sod business is down about 80 percent from two years ago. Bramer Sod is a member of Turf Producers International (TPI) and Louisville Home Builders Association

In addition to growing sod and selling it wholesale to landscapers, Bramer Sod offers a wide range of services from preparing the job site for installation to actually laying the sod. That broad range of services has been important in Bramer's success over the years. As the housing market expanded, the ability to offer grading and other services created a wider market for sod. Conversely, that wide range of services and experience has been a saving factor for the company in the downsized housing market that has dramatically reduced residential sod business across the country. Bramer Sod delivers sod within about a 60-mile radius in the Louisville-Lexington area. "About 80 percent of our business is within 30 to 40 miles," Bramer said.

## Sod market evolution



Mike Bramer owns Bramer Sod Farms, Inc. with his wife Donna.

Bramer started growing sod primarily to fill his need for contract roadway and airport sod installation projects, and noted the difficulties in sod

availability and pricing for jobs he had successfully bid. With the increased residential sod market in new housing about 15 years ago, Bramer began focusing primarily on growing top-quality sod for a network of landscape contractor customers. That focus has changed with the downturned residential market, and diversification has become the buzzword for sod farms to succeed.

At the peak of the high sod demand, Bramer Sod grew about 450 acres at 10 locations. "We've cut back to about 300 acres now," Bramer said. With a focus on quality from selected seed blends to installation, Bramer's success has been tied to not only the increased residential market that developed about 15 years ago, but also the connections he has maintained.

"There's an increased demand for sports fields; we're doing more commercial and golf course work," Bramer said. Tight budgets across the country have limited municipal and road sod projects to some degree.



About 60 percent of sod grown at Bramer Sod is harvested in big rolls.  
PHOTOS COURTESY OF BRAMER SOD.

"We had the equipment and the experience to diversify into related work. Where we were just focusing on growing the best sod we could for a number of years, we've had to turn to more grading, including providing fill dirt, rough grading, finish grading, just about any of the dirt work," Bramer said. Additionally, the company does seeding with straw mulch and erosion control blankets, and offers hydroseeding along with hydro mulch and fertilizer.

## **Diversified operations**

Although Bramer noted that some subdivision development work continues to exist in the Louisville-Lexington market, that amount is greatly reduced. "We've really had to diversify with lowered demand in the residential market. We're trying to do more in the residential renovation market," he said.

While marketing residential renovations provides access to a residential market mostly lost due to lack of new construction, this spring presented some significant challenges for Bramer Sod in this arena. Following a two-year drought in central Kentucky that challenged sod growers and other agricultural producers, heavy rains prevented a number of installations. "We had to postpone until fall, and in some cases, resell lawn renovations we had sold for spring," Bramer said.

Bramer Sod does retail a small amount of sod to homeowners through customer pick-up sales.

## **Growing sod**

Growing quality sod is a major emphasis at Bramer Sod. "There's a lot more education of the general public now about grass," Bramer said, noting that an increased awareness of sod quality exists, and his focus continues to be on producing a high-quality product. Water continues to be a major concern not only in arid climates, but throughout the world. "There's a significant

increased interest in low-water-use grass,” he said.



Brahma Turf sod is being installed at this residential site. This blend was developed by Bramer Sod Farms and uses less water.

He also cited the significant improvements seed companies have made over the years that include seed features such as low-water-use, low-mowing varieties, improved heat tolerance and a number of other features that improve the grass for the end user. Bramer uses Scott’s premium seeds, and he said, “Larry Humphreys has been our Scotts representative for probably 20 or 25 years.”

Carefully blending seed to produce the best quality possible is important to Bramer, and that attention is attested to not only by satisfied customers, but also state awards for turf quality. Bramer Sod has won a Blue Ribbon for Bluegrass Turf at the Kentucky State Fair for the past seven years. “We’ve developed a blend that we sell as Brahma Turf that works especially well in the climate we have in our area,” Bramer said. Brahma Turf produces a low canopy that takes less water, Bramer said. Additionally, it requires less fertilizer, which lowers stress on the plants and keeps costs contained. Bramer noted that interest is definitely increasing in turf that requires fewer inputs both for cost savings in products and in labor.



A sod field at Bramer Sod Farms is prepared for seeding.

Although Bramer Sod’s focus previously was on supplying high-quality sod to landscapers, it now installs about 70 to 80 percent of the sod it grows. Managing the sod availability is important with the downturned market. “We stay ahead of our needs with about 25 to 30 percent of the sod that we can irrigate with traveler irrigation units,” Bramer said. “We can bring sod out of the drought conditions when it’s needed with the use of irrigation,” Bramer said.

About 60 percent of the sod grown at Bramer Sod is harvested in big rolls using a Magnum harvester. A Brouwer harvester is used for small rolls, representing the other 40 percent of Bramer Sod sales.

## **Challenges to sod business**

In general, central Kentucky offers a moderate climate with ample rainfall for growing sod. While weather is a continuing challenge, the drought conditions of the past two years have created more than usual challenges to keeping sod growing and market ready. This year’s almost continual spring rains created the reverse effect, with wet conditions often preventing the laying of sod on jobs sold, particularly home lawn renovations which are seen as a replacement for new construction jobs in the residential market. Managing diseases and treating for grubs is necessary, but hasn’t been a major issue for Bramer Sod.

Marketing conditions that have presented lower sod demands have been the major challenge with the new residential market almost at a standstill, and commercial work down to some degree. “We’re doing whatever work we have to so

we can survive the downturned market,” Bramer said.

### **Bramer Sod Farms, Inc.**

**Location:** Louisville, Ky.

**Clientele:** Residential and commercial

**Services:** Growing and installing sod; site preparation for sod installation; hydroseeding; and fertilization

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