

Sticking to the Soil



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Topdressing company specializes in what's beneath the grass



Matthew Robinson, a former landscaper, now focuses exclusively on topdressing lawns. In some cases, he dethatches and reel mows the lawn prior to aerating and topdressing.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MATTHEW ROBINSON.

Matthew Robinson used to care for turfgrass. He operated a landscape construction and maintenance company that offered the usual array of mowing and trimming services. He started to realize that it wasn't enough to focus just on the grass; he also needed to care for the soil below, and in his area – Sharpsburg, Ga. – the soil was often a hard-packed clay. So, Robinson decided to begin offering sand-based topdressing as an added service for his customers.

"I had been talking with a bunch of landscapers in the area about doing it for over a year, but nobody was sure there was a market for it," he recalls. "I felt there was, because I wouldn't plant anything in the landscape without first adding soil amendment. So, I went out and bought a machine in the dead of winter and told them in the spring that I had a topdresser. Now they subcontract out that work to me."

Thus was born Super Sand Professional Topdressing (www.super-sand.com). "It's taken me a few years to get to this point, but I've cut back on my mowing and other work. All I'm doing now is topdressing," Robinson explains. "That's what I'm focused on. The market is growing here, and I want to be able to grow with it." While there are some companies offering topdressing in northern Atlanta, Super Sand Professional Topdressing is the only dedicated provider south of the city. "I've been trying to build a good reputation and customer base, and stay way ahead of the curve," he adds.

The first equipment Robinson purchased was a Cushman Turf Truckster from

Jacobsen with a Turfco 1530 topdresser mounted in the back. "I just paid that off, so I also recently purchased a Toro Workman with a Toro topdresser in the back," he says. "I bought it off a golf course. It had been sitting for a few years, so I had to put a little money into it to refurbish it, but I think this year I might start another crew so I'll need two machines. I could even have one crew going around just doing aerating and getting two or three lawns ready to be sanded." He's got a second truck ready to go as well, and would just need to purchase another trailer and aerator if he decides to expand.

Currently, Robinson has one full-time employee, along with occasional part-time help. That, he says, is a welcome change from his time running several crews in landscape construction. "It's really a fun business to be in right now because I'm in complete control of it. I'm not just running around in circles fixing what the crews didn't do right. Now, I'm on most jobs doing the work, and I have a chance to meet with the homeowner. It works out great; I've never had an unhappy customer."

Topdressing is much more involved than simply spreading some sand on the grass, Robinson explains. The effort involved is perhaps one reason so few companies offer the service. "Many customers ask their lawn care companies about topdressing, but they're told, 'Oh, you don't need that.' Well, the only reason everybody says that is because nobody wants to do it – it's a lot of work. But for me, that's an opportunity," says Robinson

On full-service jobs, walk-behind or zero-turn rotary mowers are used to cut the grass low. "We don't even try to bag it, we just rake it on tarps and do it the old-fashioned way," Robinson explains. He then mows the grass even lower with a reel mower. "That doesn't really have to be done, but I think it helps us find any little holes to fill in and looks a little better," he adds. It also helps get the old growth out of the way to help the roots and young growth breathe a little and get some sun, and it makes it easier to get the sand into the aeration holes.

He's currently using BlueBird walk-behind aerators, but hopes to add a Ryan Greensaire walk-behind or tow-behind with hydraulic tines that go straight up and down as opposed to a drum that turns. "It's just something I want to do to help improve my product," Robinson explains.

When he meets with homeowners, he offers them a choice of several different packages. "Most of them go with just aerating and topdressing, but especially in the spring I try to get them to go with the full service, which is scalping, bagging, getting rid of all the old material, then dethatching if it's needed, and heavy core aeration and a quarter-inch of topdressing," he explains. Seeding can be incorporated if desired. As part of the job, every hole or trench in the lawn is filled in first to ensure a smooth finished product – an extra touch that customers really appreciate, Robinson says.

He also takes a soil test free for clients and suggests they follow the recommendations, or at least gives a copy of the results to their lawn care company. "Everybody wants to keep putting lime on their lawns, but in half of the tests I've taken, the lawn has more lime than it needs already," he

observes.

In addition to marketing directly to homeowners, Robinson has made it a point to talk with lawn maintenance professionals about the services he offers. "The first thing I did was go to my former competition, all the guys I used to bid against, and gave them my business card. I told them I'm not in the landscape business anymore, and I got their business cards so I could give them to my customers. I'm referring them and they're referring me. And, the topdressing I do is helping them to help their customers." He cautions homeowners that topdressing can lead to some weed growth after the treatment, but emphasizes the lawn will be healthier in the long run.

He encourages homeowners to hire a full-service lawn care company to control weeds and keep the grass maintained. "I think landscapers can help their own reputations by caring about the soil. I'm focusing on the soil. I didn't want to just say there's a problem with the soils, I wanted to offer a solution. I found a way to help people renovate their soils without having to tear the whole lawn out in the process," says Robinson.

By the time the drag mat has helped to fill all the holes with sand and break up all the cores, it's almost impossible to see that the lawn has been aerated and topdressed. "If you were just driving by, you couldn't tell what's been done, but the homeowners who were there have watched us put down a ton of sand per thousand square feet, and then saw it all disappear down into the holes," says Robinson.

One challenge he's found in operating a topdressing business is transporting the equipment to job sites. Robinson uses a pickup and landscape trailer, which makes it difficult to fit the mowers, dethatchers, utility vehicle and topdresser needed. In some cases, to limit the equipment needed at any given time, he chooses to do the job in two days – scalping, dethatching and reel mowing the first day, and then aerating and topdressing the second day.

Of course, the bigger transportation hurdle when topdressing usually is getting the material itself delivered; Robinson has found a great solution. "I have a friend who started his own business and has a 10-ton dump truck, so I subcontract the work to him. It works great; I just pay him for the delivery. And, the best part is that when he gets to the job, he stays to work and runs the crew for me." Simply backing the utility vehicle up to the rear of the dump truck allows for easy shoveling of material into the topdresser.

The topdressing material is a special blend created by Robinson himself. It includes a river sand, topsoil and compost that he mixes at his facility with a Bobcat. "I'm having really good results with it," he says. Back when he was installing landscapes, Robinson developed an interest in mixing his own soil amendments. "I did really well just selling and delivering it on all of my landscaping jobs," he recalls. "It's easy to sell around here because of all the clay."

Robinson is hoping to convince more home builders – and get homeowners to ask their builders – to bring in soil amendments when lawns and landscapes are

first installed. To service that market, he's planning to sell his own sand mix in bulk. He never misses an opportunity to promote the benefits of aerating and topdressing. Robinson says his local equipment rental store recently added a small walk-behind Earth & Turf topdresser to its fleet. He hopes that's a sign that there's growing interest in the practice. "I think that's a great sign; I want to see people out topdressing their yards," he says. Making topdressing a routine part of lawn maintenance will only help his business, he believes. Already, homeowners who are avid golfers accustomed to seeing topdressing at their course recognize the value of the practice creating healthy turfgrass, he notes.



Matthew Robinson uses a Toro Workman and Toro topdresser, as well as a Jacobsen Turf Truckster and Turfco topdresser. "I found a way to help people renovate their soils without having to tear the whole lawn out in the process," he explains.

Topdressing can be done from early spring through late fall in the Atlanta area, but there's still an off-season to contend with, says Robinson. "It's a strange business to be in, because in the wintertime, what do you do?" To help fill the gap, he recently purchased bags to fill in order sell the topdressing mix in smaller quantities to homeowners and landscapers. He also plans to fill sandbags with straight sand for sale in flood-prone areas.

Right now, his focus is on continuing to build his business during what's started out to be another busy season. "I've had phenomenal success so far," says Robinson, happy that he's made the leap from full-service landscaping to full-time topdressing.

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