

## The Ultimate Goal



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Superior Turf-Sod focuses on efficient management and customer service



Grant  
Hagerman  
prepares  
to mow  
sod.  
*Photos  
courtesy  
of  
Superior  
Turf-Sod,  
Inc.*

Jeff and Monica Hagerman launched Superior Turf-Sod, Inc., Shelbyville, Ky., just over 13 years ago. They have met unanticipated challenges through continual dedication to their goal, efficient operation and providing excellent customer service.

Superior Turf-Sod is currently growing about 100 acres of turfgrass, including Kentucky bluegrass, tall fescue and a bluegrass-fescue mix. The acreage is down significantly due to reduced demand. The Hagermans bought an existing sod farm with standard sod equipment, merging their backgrounds in corporate sales and customer service to manage the new venture. Monica had a farm background, and combines managing the office with her American Saddlebred horse breeding, boarding and foaling operation.



Jeff, left, and  
Grant Hagerman  
discuss  
scheduling.

"Our goal from day one was to grow superior sod and couple that with superior service," Monica said. "We have had almost 25 years of working together as a couple, and we know that outstanding customer service, as well as honesty and truthfulness, will go a long way toward acquiring and retaining customers." Their son, Grant, 19, works in the sod operation and attends a local college.

Superior Turf-Sod recently provided sod to the Kentucky Horse Park for the World Equestrian Games. In addition to providing sod for commercial and residential sites, the company has provided sod for the rose garden at the governor's mansion, several state capitol sites and an exposition location at the Kentucky State Fairgrounds. Other high-profile locations include a former governor's private residence and the Sheik of Dubai's Kentucky thoroughbred operation, and they have provided specialty sod products for the centerpiece at the Governor's Breakfast on Kentucky Derby Day.

### Growing sod

The sod-producing capability of soil is a first requirement in any sod operation. Jeff said, "We are blessed with nutrient-rich, sandy loam soil, much of it creek bottoms that have benefitted from hundreds of years of occasional flooding. Typically, we do normal fertilizing and lime as indicated by soil samples. Sod farming provides constant mulching. We give back more to the land than we ever take."



Ground preparation has been added to the services provided by Superior Turf-Sod.



A TraxMax sod installer is used to install big rolls.



Newly installed sod is watered.

He added, "We watch the NTEP trials closely. We use certified seed, and are inspected and licensed as a nursery by the Kentucky office of the state entomologist. We've used several seed suppliers since we started; we now use

primarily Jacklin Seed supplied through Bunton Seed, a Louisville distributor."

Superior Turf-Sod installs about 90 percent of its sod, primarily using big rolls. "We were the first sod producer in the area to install big rolls," Monica said. "It's more efficient to install big rolls." A Brouwer SH 1560 harvester is used to harvest small rolls, a Brouwer Rollmax is used for big rolls and aTraxMax sod installer is used to install the big rolls.

### Meeting challenges

While purchasing the existing sod farm and equipment meant an operation ready to go, the Hagermans quickly learned they had to invest substantially in replacement equipment to do the job. "We replaced every piece of equipment on the sod farm," Monica noted.

Coping with Mother Nature's unpredictability is always a challenge to sod producers, and in addition to the usual challenges of fields being too dry or too wet for planting, Superior Turf-Sod was hit by Hurricane Ike's aftermath in September 2008. "It took out 30 acres of just-installed field netting and seed," Jeff said. This past summer, the company has coped with heat and drought much of the summer. "Beginning in mid-July, heat became a factor, closely followed by an extreme drop in significant precipitation," Jeff said. "We had 84 days above 90 degrees with eight record heat days, and four of those days occurred the third week of September. June and July had the highest average temperatures ever recorded here. We started irrigating the second week of July and haven't stopped. One area is irrigated out of a creek, and another farm has a lake that is almost pumped dry. In a normal year, it might be necessary to irrigate for a week or two."

In line with much of the sod industry, demand is down for the company about 70 percent from two years ago. The Hagermans have sold some land to deal with the lower demand. "We knew things were slowing down, so we dropped our acreage and were lucky enough to find the right buyer at the right time," Jeff said. Superior Turf-Sod has also leased out some former sod land to soybean production.

Continuing to meet customers' sod needs is important to keeping customers, and to the reputation of the business, so the Hagermans have established working relationships with competitors. "We maintain a great working relationship with a couple of local competitor sod farms," he said. "In any given year, one of us may call on the other to purchase wholesale sod if our fields aren't ready or our irrigation capabilities are different. Those relationships help all of us feed our families and those of our employees."

### Compensating for lost revenue

"We are also compensating with drastic expense control, have reduced our number of employees and are looking to reduce our acreage even more. If sod isn't harvested when ready, two-thirds of your costs come back the next year to keep it ready for eventual harvest," Jeff said. Timely turnover of fields is critical to a successful operation. Superior Turf-Sod added ground

preparation services for small jobs to increase revenue. While the primary market is Louisville, Frankfort, Lexington and the surrounding communities, the company has traveled up to 150 miles to install sod.

#### Marketing sod

"We have beefed up our web advertising," Monica said. "We have seen increased calls and e-mails requesting pricing information, resulting in increased sales. If someone calls, they want a quick answer. Providing that service, especially when you are usually in the upper pricing brackets, will typically win the sale. Our goal is to provide estimates within 24 hours," she said.

Shortly after launching a new website, Jeff and Monica found an unusual similarity in their website address and that of another company. "We found that our website address was similar to the Star Trek Simming Forum. We honored their request to put referrals on both home pages to redirect guests. They were so excited they took a roll of our sod to the Trekkie simming convention in Las Vegas," Monica said.



Superior  
Turf-Sod  
provides  
sod for  
the clock  
behind  
the state  
capitol.

"We have completed the process that allows us to use the 'Kentucky Proud' logo for our product. It is a source of pride for us to display that on our invoices and receipts as a sign that we are contributing to the local economy," Monica said. Kentucky Proud is a program that promotes buying local products to strengthen local economies.

#### Lessons learned

The Hagermans went into the operation with a strong sense of the importance of customer service. While the learning curve of sod production required intensive attention, the good soil and water availability were major assets. Jeff offered some pointers to people considering sod production. He said, "Do extensive market research about the existing number of competitors in the area and pricing differentials. Some farms in our area that have not updated their operations to new, more mechanized procedures are still selling sod at prices from 10 years ago. As for equipment sold with an existing business, have it evaluated by a qualified professional before agreeing to include it in the purchase. Examine the payment history of customers."

The Hagermans are also strong supporters of Turf Producers International (TPI). Jeff said, "TPI provides useful industry information, and it adds a touch of extra professionalism to be able to display the TPI logo in our advertising. We always use the TPI directory to refer customers who are

looking for a type of turf that we do not carry. We feel that if a farm cares enough about the industry to belong to TPI, we can refer with some amount of assurance." While Jeff and Monica have been able to attend only regional conferences due to financial constraints, they have found valuable information from conferences and from the TPI website, newsletters and other publications.

Nancy Riggs is a freelance writer and has been covering the green industry for *Turf* for almost 20 years. She resides in Mt. Zion, Ill.