

Warm Season Grasses And Water Conservation In California

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The Increasing Demand for Warm Season Grasses in California

The California turfgrass industry has seen a major transition from cool-season grasses to warm-season grasses in recent years.

Larry LeMay, President and seed buyer of [A-G Sod Farms](#) said they have witnessed this steadily over time. A-G's California farm locations are in Moreno Valley, Palmdale, Fresno, and Stockton.



Photo: Sod Solutions

“Twenty years ago, at our Fresno farm, which is in Central California on the

transition zone, used to sell 80% fescue and 20% warm-season grasses. Now it's probably 75% warm-season and 25% cool season," LeMay said.

A-G's Fresno farm Manager, Curtis Blasingame, said they have encouraged the transition to warm-season grasses due to water savings and the fact the grass grows better in the California climate.

LeMay said Southern California hasn't made the transition to warm-season grasses as much as he'd expect.

Over the past 12 years, the area around A-G Sod Farm has faced many periodic severe droughts which has resulted in limiting homeowners to only watering lawns once a week.

"It looks like we are headed for another drought and when they limit homeowner watering to one to two times a week, fescue won't survive here," LeMay said. "That's not enough water for it. It's too hot and too dry. Where at least with bermuda, although it may not be perfectly green, it will survive and you'll have something when it's all over with."

Blasingame agreed, saying that established bermuda lawns have the ability to be revived even if water is turned off for prolonged periods of time.

Grass Varieties

For years now, A-G Sod Farm has observed a growing demand for Bermudagrasses in its market but are pushing it more now due its water-saving characteristics.

The farm currently has one acre of CitraBlue® St. Augustine Grass planted. LeMay said it appears that this variety grows in faster, chokes out weeds and uses fewer fertilizer and herbicides.

"And the color of CitraBlue is outstanding. It's just a beautiful color," he said. "As far as water-saving, I don't know if CitraBlue is better than other St. Augustines at this point."

LeMay said as it continues to grow in, they will continue to observe its blade texture and other qualities compared to the other varieties.

"We're taking the acre of CitraBlue and turning it into 12 acres and once that's ready we'll go to the market with it," he said.

Currently, of Sod Solutions varieties, A-G Sod Farm grows Celebration Bermudagrass®, CitraBlue and NorthBridge® Bermudagrass.

Depending on how the farm's current acre of NorthBridge performs this spring, they will expand that variety as well.

"I just saw a guy harvesting dormant NorthBridge on our international sod site and it looked like it harvested really well so we're excited about that one," he said.

The Fresno location has approximately 145 acres of Celebration.

"We just don't get as many callbacks with bermudas. They are typically a one-time deal for both the grower and the landscaper who installs it," LeMay said.

He explained he was impressed with the performance of Celebration when he traveled to the University of Arizona recently to observe the test plots of bermuda for a drought study.

"I got out of the car probably 25 yards from the plots and as we walked to them, it turned out the three greenest plots in the whole thing, where everything else was pretty much dirt brown, were the Celebration plots," LeMay said. "It has a tremendous rooting system and tolerance to drought. I've seen it with my own eyes."

As the market continues to see a trend in warm-season grasses, A-G Sod Farm will continue to expand its acreage in these varieties.

"Whether you're in California, Texas or in the Sun Belt, if water issues are not there now, they're coming to a town near you soon. If nothing else, I would encourage people to take a harder look at warm-season grasses because they use less water and they survive better through the tough weather conditions," LeMay said.

Brown is media and content manager for [Sod Solutions](#), which is based in the Charleston, SC area. The company has helped successfully develop and release to the market over 20 different turfgrass varieties over the past 27 years including Palmetto[®] and CitraBlue[®] St. Augustine, EMPIRE[®] and InnovationTM Zoysia and Celebration[®], Latitude 36[®] and NorthBridge[®] Bermudagrass.

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