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Great Grass

Two Highlands County Farms Grow Environmentally Friendly Grass



KATHY WATERS/Highlands Today

Steve Thorne, director of operations for Gulf Kist Sod in Sebring, has the UltimateFlora Zoysia on display just in front of the sales office. He said that the grass, which is a new variety that is drought and shade tolerant, has become very popular.

By [Bill Rogers](#) | Highlands Today

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AVON PARK — Steve Thorne describes it as "the grass of the future."

That's because UltimateFlora Zoysia is touted as a drought-tolerant, environmentally friendly grass. Its appearance is also appealing, making the grass popular with homeowners.

"We had 10 acres and sold it out in a heartbeat," said Thorne, who is director of operations for Woerner Development Inc., which owns Gulf Kist Sod in Sebring. "We've had great success with it."

"It is so soft and provides a nicer lawn," he added.

Developed by the University of Florida to replace St. Augustine grass, Ultimate Flora Zoysia meets all Green Building standards,

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according to the Florida Green Building Coalition, the association that coordinates the Green Building program around the state.

There are nine farms in the state currently growing the grass and two of them are in Highlands County. UltimateFlora Zoysia is grown locally by Gulf Kist Sod and by Emerald Island Turf in Avon Park. Environmental Turf, the company that markets the grass, is also based in Avon Park.

According to a press release from Environmental Turf, UltimateFlora Zoysia is the first and only lawn grass to date recognized by the coalition as suitable for use in achieving a Green Home certification.

It requires significantly less water for irrigation than St. Augustine grass and has built-in mechanisms to help it withstand drought conditions. It also has a much finer, softer leaf blade than St. Augustine grass, providing the look of a Northern-type lawn.

"Water is going to become a high-dollar commodity," Thorne said.

The grass is tolerant of most herbicides and resists the Chinch bug insect that attacks and kills St. Augustine grass.

"It is catching on pretty quick," said Rex Cunningham, general manager of Emerald Island Turf Inc.

Cunningham said there is a demand for Zoysia because of its texture and looks. He added that people want something different than St. Augustine.

"They said it is crab grass; 'we kill that up north,' " Cunningham said.

"It really works with the green movement and has all these wonderful qualities," said Stacie Zinn, president of Environmental Turf, a firm dedicated to the research, development, marketing and distribution of environmentally friendly warm-season turfgrasses.

"It is an answer to a challenge we're facing in Florida with water," she noted.

The grass, which is being exported to the Caribbean, is only being grown in Florida now. However, Zinn expects it to eventually be available in other southeastern states.

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