

# Sod in the Family

## Three generations of turf farming

by Stacie Zinn & Rich Redles



PHOTOS BY RICH REDLES.

Am-Sod crewmembers at the Escondido, Calif., farm harvest SeaDwarf sprigs for replanting at the company's farm in southern San Diego, near the Mexican border. Inset, Floyd Wirthlin (left) and J.R. Wirthlin (right) stand in the sod field of the Escondido, Calif., farm of Am-Sod, Inc.

Farming has long been recognized as a family business, passed down from generation to generation. In Escondido, Calif., the tradition continues. Floyd Wirthlin has spent the past 27 years in the sod farm industry with his company Am-Sod, also known as American Sod Farms. His son J.R., (Floyd, Jr.), grew up in the business, and now J.R.'s son, 13-year-old Floyd III, is learning about sod too, driving a tractor on his summer vacation. Floyd said it's gratifying to see J.R. take over the company he and his family built.

"It means a lot to me, a great deal to me, because this has been his livelihood all of

his grown life and his family depends on it," Floyd said.

As J.R. steps up as the full-time manager of the family's four Southern Calif. locations, Floyd has cut back his schedule to indulge his other passion, aviation.

"I currently have a little project I'm working on," Floyd said, with a twinkle in his eye. "I'm building a helicopter."

Prior to becoming a sod farmer, Floyd served as an army aviator and artillery man during a 22-year military career. After leaving the service in 1978 Floyd went into the sod farm business in Southern Calif. Eight years later, Floyd bought out his partner. By then, J.R. had

joined the company.

In 1993, the Wirthlins moved their main farm location to 300 acres of leased land in San Diego's idyllic San Pasqual Valley. Their neighbors in the valley are the San Diego Wild Animal Park and several other farms, including a dairy.

The Wirthlins now have four sod farms in Southern Calif., from Barstow to the extreme southern end of San Diego called South Bay.

The South Bay farm is unusual because it sits on land that was acquired through an IBWC lease, (International Boundary and Water Commission). The farm is literally on the boundary between the United

States and Mexico. A barbed wire fence and ditch separates the two countries. An oversized Mexican flag flies just over the border and the city of Tijuana is visible from the sod fields.

J.R. said that before the U.S. government erected lights on the border, it wasn't unusual to find footprints in his sod fields some mornings made by illegal immigrants scurrying across the farm that was still-wet from the irrigation system.

Floyd said that while leasing land is not necessarily the preferred way to secure land in Southern Calif., he finds it the most economical because the area's real estate is cost prohibitive for farming.

Am-Sod delivers their sod with a fleet of trucks bearing slogans such as: Just Rollin' A Lawn; Can't We All Just Get A Lawn; No Need to Seed; and Sod-isfaction Guaranteed.

Am-Sod's customer list for their sod focuses on three main categories: San Diego retailers such as nurseries, garden centers and Home Depot; landscape contractors; and home owners.

"We have a three-tier price structure," Floyd explained.

The first tier, the retailers, get the lowest price because of the volume that they buy. The second tier, the landscape contractors, pay a slightly higher wholesale price. Home owners who buy direct, the third tier, pay the highest price in order to protect the first two tiers of customers.

"We don't compete with anybody that we're wholesaling to. We make sure that

we're at least a cent a foot above their retail price so that we're not competing with them," Floyd said. "I think it helps us in our marketing program because it recognizes volume both for the Home Depot and the other nurseries we sell to. It also recognizes the contractor because he helps sell to the home owner. If he's doing a job for the home owner and we take care of him with a relatively good price, he'll steer toward us."

Floyd and J.R. run the company with the help of several long-time employees, plus two sales consultants, Nick Spardy and George Petersen.

J.R. and Spardy have been friends since they were in their early 20s. Like J.R., Spardy grew up in the golf/turf industry in San Diego. His late father, Ray Spardy, was a golf supplier and consultant in the area for 35 years and served on the San Diego Golf Superintendent Association's board of directors. Spardy now runs a SDGSA scholarship and research tournament in his father's name.

Each Am-Sod farm grows different turf-grass varieties suited to particular markets. Among the grasses grown are: Tifgreen, Tifway, Raleigh St. Augustine, Bonzai dwarf tall fescue, Jaguar tall fescue and SeaDwarf seashore paspalum. Over the years, the Wirthlins have experimented with turf varieties, changing their inventory mix to better serve their customers.

"We used to grow a lot of bluegrass and then tall fescue pushed the bluegrass out," J.R. said.



*This close-up shot of a newly harvested sprig of SeaDwarf seashore paspalum shows a healthy root.*

Their latest licensed variety, SeaDwarf seashore paspalum, was added to meet the demand for a more environmentally friendly turf. Reps from water agencies near his two San Diego-area farms have asked him point blank, "Why can't you find a grass that uses less water?"

He did some investigation and learned that SeaDwarf requires about the half water needed to irrigate bermudagrass. In addition, the grass is highly salt tolerant. Although potable water may be used as an irrigation source, it is not necessary. Reclaimed, effluent, even seawater under the right conditions, will work well for the grass once it's established. An added plus, he said, is that SeaDwarf generally won't go dormant in the Southern California climate.

Marketed and licensed worldwide by Environmental Turf, the company's SeaDwarf breeding stock is grown in Florida.

"So I flew out to Florida to take a look at it and brought a half a roll home. I plugged some right in the middle of my TifGreen lawn, and my dad plugged some right in the middle of his bentgrass lawn. We kind of just let it rest there. I didn't commit," J.R. said. "After we went through the winter, my wife was saying, 'That's what we want. Get rid of the TifGreen. I want that.' The TifGreen didn't go dormant, but it went yellow, and the SeaDwarf, we had this big round green spot right in the middle of the lawn."

The Wirthlins planted several acres of SeaDwarf on the Escondido farm. Once it



*Above left, J.R. Wirthlin and a crewmember make adjustments to the sprigging machine at Am-Sod's South Bay farm. Above right, Merlin, the staff mechanic, and a helper, make repairs to machinery in the shop at Am-Sod's Escondido farm.*



had grown-in, J.R. and Spardy sold some small quantities of the grass to local golf course superintendents in the area for test sites.

At Fairbanks Ranch Country Club, a private golf club located close to the Pacific Ocean in Rancho Santa Fe, Spardy said superintendent Brian Darrock had struggled for a long time with the course's Matador fescue cart paths and roughs, as well as with the 419 bermudagrass on some of the fairways and tees. The salt content in the soil, Spardy said, was "too extreme" for the other grass varieties, but once Darrock installed SeaDwarf on those problem areas, they were suddenly vibrant and healthy.

With its close proximity to the ocean, the lakes at Fairbanks serve as saltwater tidal pools. Darrock planted the grass around a marsh in a preserved area at the edge of one of the lake banks. Because it was a protected area, it had to be left unmowed, which worked well with the turf's dwarf nature. SeaDwarf's salt tolerance was evident as seawater flowed up, over and even below the grass surface and did not damage the turf. In fact, it stayed green and continues to thrive in that environment.

A separate test was conducted at Twin Oaks Golf Course in San Marcos, a high-end public golf course owned by JC Resorts. The irrigation system at Twin Oaks was recently tested and found to have a salt content of 7,040 PPM, which is fairly salty.

Spardy said he worked with superintend-

Left, With a pitchfork and wrenches in the foreground, crews test irrigation to prepare fields for sprigging.



ent John Tomlinson, and vice president of golf maintenance Bob Dobeck, to install SeaDwarf on a problem area on the course's 15th hole. The 15th fairway's steep slope filters down to a basin with heavy soil and less than adequate drainage. With the combination of salt, poor drainage and bad soil, Spardy said the existing 419 bermudagrass on the course refused to grow at this spot.

The installation of the SeaDwarf sod at Twin Oaks included, "No prep of the area. We just threw it down," Spardy said. On a visit back to the site, Spardy said the green patches of SeaDwarf "stood out like a postage stamp" amidst the dead bermudagrass. The test was so successful, Spardy said, that Tomlinson and Dobeck are considering using the grass in other problem areas.

With the golf course successes under his belt, Wirthlin said he also believes the grass will do well on sports fields, as it has in several locations in Florida, but his main target is home lawns in water-starved Southern California.

In September of 2004, encouraged by the early success, Wirthlin expanded his SeaDwarf stock to plant another five acres at the South Bay farm location. By spring, on the two farms they should have had about 50 acres of SeaDwarf ready to go, but Mother Nature had other plans. Although the San Pasqual valley was known to be prone to flooding, in September of 2004 Floyd said he believed the risk was minor.

"There's a river which is dry most of the time but if you have a real wet year, you can flood. It doesn't flood up this far," Floyd said. "We've had a minor flood once since we've been here."

Between October 2004 and May 2005, Am-Sod's Escondido farm received a highly unusual 24 inches of rain. The nearby river backed up and saturated canyon walls gave way to mud slides, smothering some 15 acres of tall fescue and burying 25 acres of young SeaDwarf under several inches of silt.


Losing that much turf was more than just a hit to the bottom line. For the Wirthlins, it had an emotional toll, too.

"So the first thing you do is get is over the depression and that is no lie. After the water receded and I could see from the road what I was left with, it's just like getting hit in the stomach. It knocks the wind out of you," J.R. said. "But, you know, my dad, he's tough as nails. He came in the next morning and said, 'OK. We've had one night. Get over it. What you've got to do, get going on it as fast as



Above, A crewmember rakes newly harvested SeaDwarf sprigs to ready them for transplant.

you can.' You just accept it and move on. My dad gives me like 24 hours of mourning. Then that's it. After that, the mourning period is over. You figure it out and get it fixed." To fix it, he plans to replant and expand his inventory to meet the growing demand for environmentally friendly turf in his region.

Floyd said that despite the setbacks, he still enjoys sod farming. "It's a very challenging business in a lot of different ways. It's very competitive here. It's a very heavy capital investment for all the equipment that's required. But once you get rolling, it's a very satisfying business," Floyd said. "I like it because it's very gratifying to our customers. There's an instant gratification with sod. It completely changes the characteristic of their home overnight." 

Stacie Zinn and Rich Redles are frequent contributors to Turf. They reside in Naples, Fla.

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P.O. Box 449 • St. Johnsbury, VT • 05819  
802-748-8908 • fax 802-748-1866