

Seeing sod as pay dirt, For some LI farmers, grass is the way to grow

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Quotes: 'This is something that's in my genes.' - Michael DeLea Jr., a third-generation sod farmer in Wading River

Michael DeLea Jr. steps from the dust-blown earth onto a quarter-mile stretch of living carpet and is transformed.

"I love everything about this business," says the third-generation sod farmer, owner of Greenlawn Sod Farms Inc. in Wading River. "I wasn't attracted to any other type of farming. I always knew from when I was a kid, it was turf all the way."

It's not always an easy business to love, particularly this summer. Three months of sweltering, rainless weather forced him to irrigate most of his 250 acres of sod nearly round the clock, increasing fuel costs and leading him to delay harvesting into September. And dry conditions that make the topsoil powdery are complicating his plans to seed for the next crop.

The high price of East End land, meanwhile, means that two fields he currently leases may wind up on the selling block, which would force him to look for new farmland to supplement the 110 acres he owns.

But for DeLea and the Island's three other sod farmers dealing with similar issues, the conditions are a momentary setback in a business that continues to thrive despite its forced eastward migration over the past quarter century and a housing development boom that has kept the market for sod healthy.

"This is something that's in my genes," says DeLea, without a hint of resignation.

He smiles at the memory of a recent talk with several elderly Middle Island farmers about a fellow they recalled pulling up to their property between the 1920s and 1940s in an old black Buick, offering to buy parcels of grassy pasture. "I knew it was my grandfather," Louis DeLea, he says. "Two weeks later the black Buick was back and four men got out and used spades to cut pasture and load it onto a truck by hand. He was selling it to cemeteries."

L. DeLea & Sons Sod Farms of East Northport, from which Michael parted 10 years ago to form Greenlawn, today is a big operation, with acreage here and in southern New Jersey.

Vincent Sasso, manager and co-owner of L. DeLea & Sons, says that despite the pressures of higher fuel costs and offers "three times a day" from real estate speculators to buy the family land, sod farming remains a good, stable business. In fact, he says, the real challenge is finding enough land to farm.

It's also an expensive, labor-intensive business that requires 18 months to two years for the sod to develop before

farmers can reap profits, which are comparatively high for agriculture. (Greenlawn sells sod for between 40 cents and 45 cents a square foot.)

More than 3,000 acres, almost all of it in eastern Suffolk, are devoted to sod locally, according to the Long Island Farm Bureau.

In the past half century there's been a big move eastward from the local industry's previous grounds in the Melville and Huntington area, where players such as McGovern Sod Farms once thrived before selling to developers. In the 1970s and 1980s, sod farmers began displacing potato farmers on the East End and have flourished as new developments turn to sod for quick lawns with a manicured look.

"The development industry demands sod for the finished product, and that's always been a source of demand," says a spokeswoman for DeLalio Sod Farms in Dix Hills and Calverton.

Partly for that reason, it's one of the region's biggest crops. "It's a significant industry, both in acreage and dollars," says Joseph Gergela, executive director of the farm bureau. While the business is cyclical, rising and falling with the economy, the past decade has been "very good. There's lots of demand for it."

Scott Clark, nursery specialist at Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County, says sod farming has been the subject of several misconceptions, among them that continual harvesting lowers the level of the land, and that it burdens groundwater with chemicals.

In fact, he says, sod farming is "a good use of the soil. Very little soil is taken with the strip of sod. And where you have good, thick turf stands, there's a lot less leaching of materials into the groundwater."

But those who toil in the business admit it's a lot of work. "I don't know too many people as young as I am looking to do this," says DeLea, who is 43. "From the middle of March, I haven't missed that many sunrises, I'll tell you that."

Same is true of installing sod. Herman Lindau, owner and chief executive of Hermann Lindau & Son of Huntington, has overseen some of the largest sodding projects regionally, including installing 370,000 square feet of sod for the U.S. Open in Bethpage. When his father, Hermann, started the business in the 1930s, he, too, used to buy plots of pasture to tear up with spades and move as sod to new locations. These days, the son buys from growers such as DeLea and uses raking machines to cut back on the labor and cost.

Sod farming, too, is finding ways to cut the labor and cost. Three-man turf-cutting tractors that slice sod into 18-by-60-inch slabs weighing 25 pounds are slowly being replaced by new machines that require only a driver. Sod is rolled into 10-square-foot rolls that are stacked automatically. DeLalio Sod Farms has begun deploying them this season, and L. DeLea & Sons expects to have them soon, Sasso says.

Shipping sod also has become a less tenuous venture with the introduction of warehouse cooling machines that draw out heat and draw in cool air, affording sod a longer shelf life and allowing it to be shipped longer distances, says Cornell's Clark. DeLalio uses them.

Sasso says that if land trends continue on Long Island, the future may find DeLea replicating its New Jersey operation, which ships as far south as South Carolina and to other regions, including upstate New York. DeLea has shipped sod to major stadiums, including Giant Stadium, which once ordered sod installed atop its artificial turf for soccer games.

Either way, Sasso says, Long Island will remain the core market. Long Islanders are prime consumers of sod and local producers grow "the best sod in the country."

"The rest of the country, they're not as fussy as we are about grass," he says.

[Illustration]

Caption: Newsday Photos/Jim Pepler-1) Vincent Sasso, part owner and manager at L. DeLea & Sons Sod Farms in East Northport, says

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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