

Turfgrass Sod Production



Introduction

Turfgrass sod production is a relatively new enterprise in Ireland with the oldest companies in the field being no more than 17 years in business. There are up to 10 - 12 producers at present with a total area of approximately 200 hectares. It is not a labour intensive business and the production of the sods can quite easily be operated as a two person operation. If a sod laying service is also provided the labour requirement rises rapidly. The distribution and marketing of the sod are the critical factors in the success of a turfgrass sod enterprise.

Market

The market for sods can be divided into the following areas.

1. Landscape contractors
2. Golf Clubs
3. Football clubs and minor sports
4. Private gardens

The use of sods in landscape works can be completed quickly and there is no waiting period for grassed areas to germinate before invoices can be presented for payment.

Landscape contractors will vary in their requirements from 30 square metres for a small garden to 10,000 square metres for a large site. This market requires that product be available at all times as landscape contractors will be completing contracts at all times of year.

Golf Clubs are constantly upgrading and renovating their courses. There is a steady demand for sod for tees, green surrounds and fairways. The market for fine turf sod used in green construction is quite small as most greens are now developed from seed.

Football clubs require sod to renovate goalmouths and centre circles. This work is normally carried out on an annual or biennial basis. As football is attracting more financial support this market will expand over the next decade.

There is a steady demand by homeowners for sod to upgrade their lawns but this normally requires that the sod be laid by the producer. The labour requirement for this market will vary with demand and requires high levels of organisation on the part of the producer.

Promotion of the product is essential to develop a business. Exhibiting at horticultural shows and distributing publicity material to garden centres are normal methods of market development for the private garden as well as entries in trade and telephone directories



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This is one of a series of fact sheets on potential income generating activities.

All fact sheets are available in the Advisory Section of the Teagasc Website
www.teagasc.ie

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Teagasc Fact Sheets present a brief overview of a topic. Further detailed advice should always be sought from relevant sources.

Stands at trade shows and visiting contractors on site and at their premises is the best way of developing contacts with landscape contractors. Punctuality and reliability of delivery are the main requirements of contractors. Developing contact with sports clubs requires considerable amounts of time and travel. Quality work is the best advertisement for the product in the golf and sports areas. Use of local media and directories are essential in raising awareness of both the producer and the product.

Production Methods

The sod is developed in exactly the same way as any grass surface. The ground is ploughed, harrowed and graded. These operations are followed by stone burying rolling and seeding. A nutrient application programme is followed to produce the finished product in one and a half to two growing seasons. Cutting is undertaken on a regular basis to produce a sward that has sufficient root density to allow the sod to be lifted and transported without tearing occurring. Light textured soil over which cutting and harvesting machinery can travel in all but the most inclement weather conditions is essential if the product is to be available on a year round basis. As sod is a heavy and bulky item it is desirable that production units are relatively near to the market. Production units are normally established using an area of approximately 4 hectares but access to a larger area is essential as some existing units are in now in excess of 50 hectares in extent. It is difficult to rent or lease land for sod production, as landowners are nervous of the long-term effects of sod production in terms of depletion of topsoil. In fact sod has been produced on land in the UK over 10 years with no discernible change in the depth or quality of topsoil.

Establishment

There must be access to tillage equipment to establish the grass. Maintenance will require grass cutting equipment, sprayers and fertiliser spreaders. Specialist tractor mounted sod cutters are normally used to harvest the sod although it is possible to harvest sod with a pedestrian operated sod cutter. Handling equipment, pallets and transport must be available to bring the product to market. A two and a half tonne truck or a Jeep and trailer are normally used to deliver small quantities of sod.

Returns from Sod Production

The retail price of sod averages at €4.00 - €4.55 per square metre. Large quantities will be offered at a discount while the price for large quantities is in the region of €3.00 per square metre. If the sod is supplied and laid the price is normally doubled. On average 75-80% of the area sown is harvestable.

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