

**KEEPING IT GREEN** — *Josh Summerford, a graduate student in turfgrass management, works as a graduate assistant for the University of Arkansas athletic program. He helps maintain the state-of-the-art turfgrass surfaces in Razorback Stadium and other athletic fields. (Photo by Fred Miller.)*



Farm workers at Quail Valley Grasses in Lonoke County cut rolls of sod that will be shipped to a golf course at Gallatin, Tenn.

### TEXT AND PHOTOS BY FRED MILLER

Jay Saxton gets paid to watch grass grow. It's considerably more complicated than it sounds, especially since he's responsible for making sure his is the side of the fence you've heard about, where the grass is always greener.

Saxton, a 2003 graduate of the University of Arkansas turfgrass management program, is farm manager for Little Rock-based Quail Valley Grasses. He oversees sod and sprig production on about 900 acres of the company's Lone Cypress Plantation, located about 15 miles east of Little Rock. The sod farm produces three varieties each of bermudagrass and zoysia.

### Grass is big business in Arkansas.

Golf courses account for most of the company's business, Saxton says, followed by landscapers and garden centers. Quail Valley also provides turfgrass for athletic fields, including Razorback Stadium and the outdoor football practice field at the University of Arkansas, and for Division of Agriculture research.

Quail Valley sells grass almost entirely in wholesale. Saxton says sod is sold by truckload, each of which holds about 1,000 yards. "We once sold 34 truckloads in a day," he says.

Grass is big business in Arkansas.

“The production, cultivation and utilization of turfgrass is all or part of many industries in Arkansas and accounts for thousands of jobs and millions of dollars for the state’s economy,” says Mike Richardson, associate professor of horticulture.

Five Division of Agriculture scientists collaborate in turfgrass research and extension programs and have developed one of the finest undergraduate and graduate education programs in the country in Dale Bumpers College of Agricultural, Food and Life Sciences, says Dr. David Hensley, head of the department of horticulture.

In addition to Richardson, the turfgrass team includes plant pathologists Dr. Eugene Milus and horticulturists Dr. Doug Karcher, Dr. John Boyd and Dr. James Robbins.

“The research and extension programs provide science-based support for the ‘green industry,’ and the academic program prepares students for leadership and management roles in the industry,” Richardson says.

Many undergraduate and graduate students in the turfgrass program serve internships that offer experience they find valuable after graduation.

Graduate student Josh Summerford works as a graduate assistant in the University of Arkansas athletics department, helping manage the turfgrass surfaces in Razorback Stadium and other athletic fields. The athletics

program pays his assistantship stipend and tuition.

Summerford said his experience at the U of A is valuable preparation for a career in turfgrass management for athletic fields after he completes his master’s degree.

Arkansas has 55 turf production firms with gross sales of \$24 million, according to *Arkansas Horticulture Industry: Economic Impact and*

*Characteristics*. Turfgrass is also an essential part of the state’s 243 golf courses and 67 irrigation installation and service firms that contribute a combined \$248 million to the economy.

Karcher, quoting the same Division of Agriculture publication, says, “Sod, landscape and horticultural services employ almost 9,000 Arkansans and contribute industry sales of more than \$272 million to the state’s economy.”

The turfgrass industry is also a large part of the lawn and garden equipment and retail floral and garden supply businesses, which contribute a total of almost \$930 million and almost 12,000 jobs to the state’s economy, according to the same publication.



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**FORE!** – (Above) Bobby Alford of the Helena team tees off on the 10<sup>th</sup> hole during the University of Arkansas Turfgrass Classic April 24. The tournament raises money for scholarships, educational programs and turf research for the U of A Horticulture Department.

“It’s easy to see that the U of A turfgrass program is supporting a huge and important chunk of Arkansas’ economy,” Richardson says.

Saxton began working for Quail Valley in 1998 as a summer job between his freshman and sophomore years as a business major at the University of Alabama. Quail Valley president Roger Gravis recommended that Saxton consider seeking a turf management degree in the U of A horticulture department, and he took the advice.

“I learned an incredible amount from Drs. Richardson and Karcher, and from all the faculty,” Saxton says.

“I was already on the job, but I had no background in the science,” he says. “The science of what the plant is doing and what it requires to maintain quality has helped with my decision making – knowing what’s going on and what to do with it.”

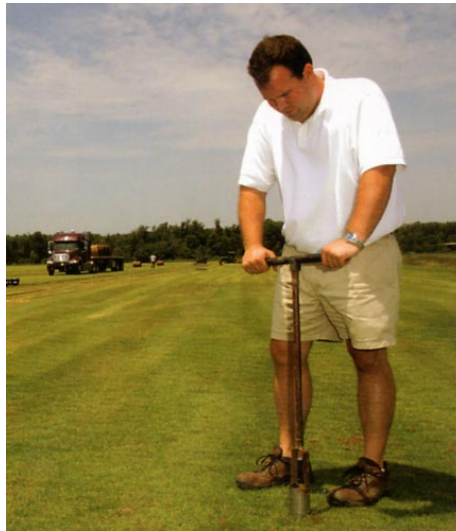
Saxton worked with Richardson and Karcher, as well as Division of

Agriculture faculty in biological and agricultural engineering, to develop an automated system that washes soil from sprigs so they can be shipped internationally.

“We’re developing a market in Barbados,” Saxton says. “We’re selling zoysiagrasses to a golf course on the island.”

The sprigs could not be shipped with any soil still clinging to them and washing them by hand would be a tremendously labor-intensive process. With support from U of A turfgrass program and beginning with a prototype designed by agricultural engineers, Saxton built a machine that cleans the sprigs sufficiently to clear Barbados customs and also preserve the grass during shipping.

“We figured out a way to speed it up, and we can flat get them cleaned in a hurry,” Saxton says. “We have a lot of ideas in the works for shipping more grass to the islands,” he says.



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**SOIL SAMPLE** – (Above) Jay Saxton, farm manager of Quail Valley Grasses in Lonoke County, takes soil samples to determine fertilizer needs of the bermudagrass crop. Saxton is a 2003 graduate of the turfgrass program at the University of Arkansas.

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