

RUSKIN - Sod farmer Jim Anderson reached down and plucked a small clump of Celebration Bermudagrass from his field last week, showing off the plump, water-filled roots hidden below the dry, sandy surface.

"When I first saw these roots, I thought it had a disease or something," Anderson recalled. He called a research biologist.

It turns out those fat little roots are what make Celebration ideal for Florida lawns because they hold so much water, he said.

Anderson is banking on Florida residents' commitment to water conservation, and because most turf is planted around houses, he hopes homeowners will follow his lead.

All of Anderson's 80-acre sod farm, off Cockroach Bay Road, is planted with Celebration Bermudagrass. He switched from water-guzzling St. Augustine to Celebration turf in 2001.

St. Augustine and Bahia are the most commonly used sod varieties in Florida. But the golf course industry and builders of massive developments, including Mira Bay in Apollo Beach, already know the benefits of the new, Australia-born turf, known in that country as Super Sport turf.

It can be found in the common areas at Mira Bay and on portions of the Claw, the golf course at the University of South Florida. WCI Communities Inc., the developer of Sun City Center, has also used it on courses in south Hillsborough County.

Anderson and others selling Celebration want homeowners to consider it an option for their lawns.

"It's comparable in price to St. Augustine grass but requires less maintenance and less water," said Tobey Wagner, whose South Carolina company, Sod Solutions, has the sole authority to license sod farmers to grow Celebration Bermudagrass in the United States.

Florida is the No. 1 sod-producing state in the nation, University of Florida Professor John Haydu said. His most recent figures show that Florida sod farmers sold \$307 million worth of turf grown on 80,000 acres in 2002.

Sixteen of Florida's sod farmers, including Anderson, are licensed to grow and sell Celebration Bermudagrass, which is available at retail nurseries throughout the state. Wagner said about 300 acres of Celebration are growing in Florida and another 800 acres elsewhere.

"We expect that number to double by the end of the summer," he said.

Wagner was at Anderson's farm last week for the annual Florida Sod Growers Cooperative field day. Some 250 people walked across his carpet of blue-green turf, and watched a sod-cutting machine slice it into rectangles. Demonstrators lifted the tightly woven sod from the dirt, gingerly stacking it behind the cutter.

"When we brought it here, our goal was to find something better for Florida at a competitive price that could be made available on a mass scale," Wagner said.

Wagner renamed the turf Celebration for use in the United States. He didn't want to use the name Super Sport for fear it might pigeonhole it as turf only for sports fields and golf courses. Also, he said, he wanted it to have a festive name.

Sod Solutions introduced Celebration in the U.S. in 1999 after five years of field testing. It was one of 110 sods tested in the Southeast, Wagner said. "When we get heavy rains, it holds together," Wagner said. "During a drought, it loses its color, but it survives. It's doing well all over the Southeast."

Homeowners can find out where to buy Celebration by going to Wagner's Web site, [www.sodsolutions.com](http://www.sodsolutions.com).

## **GRASS FACTS**

Some characteristics of Celebration Bermudagrass.

### **Maintenance**

- Reduces mowing as much as 50 percent over other Bermudas
- Best height: 1/2 to 1 inch. Can be mowed to 1/4 to 1/2 inch
- Use standard rotary or reel mower

### **Climate**

- Adapts to Southeast, primarily Missouri and Tennessee through Florida
- Cold hardy and frost tolerant
- Thrives in heat and humidity; tolerates drought well

### **Environmental**

- Growth style acts as natural weed barrier
- Efficient root system reduces water use and drought damage

### **Functionality**

- Grows in sandy loam, muck and clay soils
- Fair shade tolerance
- Vigorous expansion
- Highly durable

*Source: Sod Solutions*

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