

EMPIRE Zoysia is challenging St. Augustine

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EAST MANATEE - A narrow-blade grass from Brazil with a deep root system may one day challenge St. Augustine as the most popular lawn grass in Manatee County, a Schroeder-Manatee Ranch official said.

Developed in Brazil, EMPIRE Zoysia has an underground root system that the hugely popular St. Augustine-Floritam doesn't have and is about as easy to maintain, said Clive Morris, vice president of agriculture at SMR.

"St. Augustine has bigger leaves and thicker stems than Zoysia," Morris said. "Zoysia goes deeper, has greater reserves and is a nicer looking grass."

But agriculture officials caution that like all lawn grasses that grow in Florida's hot, humid conditions, Zoysia isn't without its problems.

Zoysia is susceptible to disease and insects like other grasses, said Laurie Trenholm, a University of Florida assistant professor in environmental horticulture.

"It's not a miracle grass," Trenholm said. "Zoysia has the potential of being the next best grass for use in home lawns, but I am not sure it is the Empire Zoysia. In the meantime, it's a very nice grass."

SMR has 80 acres in EMPIRE Zoysia and pays a royalty to Sod Solutions, which owns the rights to it.

"We've been expanding it," Morris said. "We feel bullish on Zoysia."

Legends Walk subdivision is nearly 100 percent in Zoysia. The new grass is also displayed in front of Greenbrook's State Road 70 entrance. The new Greenbrook East subdivision may use Zoysia for its medians and landscaping, Morris said.

Right now, sales of EMPIRE Zoysia make up only 8 percent of SMR's \$3 million turfgrass division, with St. Augustine coming in at 70 percent. But if it takes off as expected, the Zoysia could move up to 25 to 30 percent of the share, pulling St. Augustine down to roughly 50 percent, Morris said.

The turf industry is looking for an alternative to St. Augustine because St. Augustine requires so much supplemental water, said Mike Holsinger, a horticulture agent in Sarasota.

"In drought conditions, St. Augustine may not come back because it has a shallower root system than Zoysia," Holsinger said. "Zoysia will go into a little more of a dormancy."

While both St. Augustine and Zoysia have an above-ground root system called stolons, Zoysia also has rhizomes, a system of underground runners.

Although it is more drought-resistant, Zoysia will turn brown when denied water, Morris said.

Zoysia is also a bit more expensive than St. Augustine. A builder will pay \$200 to \$300 more wholesale to put in a 5,000-square-foot lawn with EMPIRE Zoysia than St. Augustine, Morris said.

"The advantages that I see in Zoysia is that it holds its green color well, and you can use less nitrogen on it," Trenholm said. "I wouldn't want to use it in a really shady situation. The rhizomes do give it a little better stress tolerance."

Besides developing Lakewood Ranch, SMR's agriculture division produces roughly \$8 million in gross income from the sale of turf grass, cattle, citrus, vegetables and trees.

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