

Bob Winters

Lawn Ranger to the Rescue

By Greg Lilly, Editor

Bob Winters re-invents himself periodically. His latest incarnation helps area residents transform their lawns into healthy, green, vibrant turf.

"My career has been varied," Bob states. "It started up in New York City working 13 years for 'Ma' Bell. Then I made a career change to the super market business around Manhattan, the Bronx, West Chester, Connecticut, New Jersey, and Long Island." His super market career consisted of establishing the first 18 Food Emporiums in the greater New York City area.

Bob and his wife, Jean, moved to Florida and continued building, converting and opening super markets there. "I finished up with a career in real estate development and brokerage," he adds.

Williamsburg became Bob and Jean's next destination. "We're 'halfbacks.' Fifty years on Long Island, 13 in Florida, and 12 years here. Our neighbors call us halfbacks: Long Island to Florida then half way back is here!" Bob says with a laugh.

Enjoying retirement was the plan when they moved to Williamsburg. When Bob arrived, he continued with some real estate work, but something was missing.

"I thought I needed something more to do than play golf," Bob says. "Jean and I did Census 2000 together. We had a good time going around interviewing people and finding where neighborhoods were. I ended up looking in the paper after we finished our career as enumerators. There was a job listed for the Extension Service looking for someone to run the Turf Love program to teach homeowners to grow beautiful turf without messing up our very sensitive environment. It was an extension of the Chesapeake Bay Preservation Act."

Although Bob didn't have any turf experience, Ed Overton, the extension agent at the time, told him the position was responsible for recruiting "Lawn Rangers" to do at least 150



visits a year and for running seminars to educate the public.

"I had been doing that for years in the business community," Bob explains. "I was hired based on that, not my knowledge of lawns. I had to learn. My first step was to become a Master Gardener." Bob decided that earning the Master Gardener designation would be important for him since he would be recruiting Master Gardeners to be Lawn Rangers. "I talked Jean into taking the class with me," he adds. Bob and Jean spent three months in 2001 taking the classes to become Master Gardeners.

"The funding dried up," Bob says of the state Act that established the program, "but James City County picked up the program rather than re-inventing the wheel by creating their own program to do the same thing we were doing, which was protection of the sensitive environments here." Now, Bob and his Lawn Rangers work as part of the James City County

Virginia Cooperative Extension.

Recently, Bob became a certified nutrient management planner. "This means all the plans I write are certified plans. The county gets credit for the total acres we do each year toward our objectives specified within the Chesapeake Bay Act." Along with homeowners' lawns, Bob and his Rangers have branched out and completed nutrient plans for eight golf courses.

"Some of my Lawn Rangers are golfers, so they love to go out and do soil samples on golf courses," he says. "I have no trouble finding volunteers. I write the plans. I meet with the superintendents of the golf courses to try to help them do a better job of managing. They're all under budget limitations anyway, so they want to conserve the amount of nitrogen and phosphorus that goes down."

Nitrogen and phosphorus are two of the main nutrients needed for a healthy lawn, but too much can be a problem in the water that

drains into our ponds, streams, rivers and the Bay. Bob says an important part of the Turf Love program is the soil testing, which is the first step to the certified nutrient management plan.

“We do soil testing to see what nutrients are in the soil so a fertilizer can be used to meet those specific needs without excess running into our creeks and streams,” he explains. “Some places are high in phosphorus, like Ford’s Colony and Governor’s Land. Phosphorus runoff is what causes algae blooms in our ponds and streams.”

About 90% of homes in the area have tall fescue according to Bob’s estimate. “Everyone wants a twelve-month solution,” he says. “That type of grass comes the closest to year-round color for this area. We’re in a transition zone where everything grows, but nothing grows well all year. You could grow Saint Augustine like what we had in Florida, but it goes dormant in the winter, and people don’t like that. People want green all year round. Tall fescue is what we try to manage here, although I try to talk people out of it and to go with Bermuda or Zoysia. We’re not having a lot of success doing that.”

The warm climate grasses like Bermuda and Zoysia use less water, but turn white in the winter. That’s not ideal for most homeowners.

Bob has some tips to achieve a healthy and green lawn while still being kind to the environment. First, concentrate on root development.

“Tall fescue is a good solution because it’s a deep-rooted turf,” he explains. “Once it’s planted, most homeowners mitigate the effect of the deep roots by cutting it too short. The roots only go down as deep as the blades go up. If you’re cutting your turf at two inches then your root system stops at two inches. All the energy of the plant goes into new shoots for more photosynthesis, to survive and replace what was chopped off.”

When that energy goes to new shoots, the roots can’t dig deeper.



Q & A

An Interview with Kathy Chambers

PRESIDENT OF WILLIAMSBURG AREA ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS®

Email Kathy at info@waarealtor.com

For individuals who have never sold a home, what is the process like?

CHAMBERS:

Imagine a scenario like this: You have been a very hardworking Seller, following all the recommendations your REALTOR® has made. You have decluttered, cleaned your house until it sparkles, made all the recommended repairs and updated your house. You receive a call for a showing appointment and you run through your house straightening up and running the vacuum to make sure your house looks perfect for the potential buyer to tour your house. You feel lucky when you get a showing and you hope this visitor is the perfect match for your home. You are elated when your REALTOR® calls to tell you that you have an offer on your house!

An offer is great, but there is much work ahead. The role of your REALTOR® is pivotal at this stage. Their education, knowledge and experience will guide you through the negotiating stage. Sometimes it is hard for Sellers to remember that the home they love is now a product for sale and offers are not personal; it is business. Having a REALTOR® representing you and your best interest can help you make the best decisions possible.

The day comes when you have a ratified contract! But...it is not over! There are many steps your Real Estate Professional will guide you through to reach a successful closing. Within a short amount of time there will be an inspection

of your home by a home inspector of the Buyer’s choice. The Buyer pays for this inspection. Home inspections can last on the average three to four hours or more. If areas of concern are identified during the inspection, the Buyer’s REALTOR® will submit the request of repairs to your REALTOR® who will sit down with you to review the findings and requested repairs, if any. Negotiations may begin again at this time. Sellers have the right to state they will do all of the repairs requested, some of the repairs requested or none of the repairs. Your REALTOR® will explain your options and the possible outcome for each. Not knowing the consequences for choosing bad options are immense. A Seller can not walk away from a contract as a result of a home inspection, but a Buyer can.

If you live in a neighborhood with a Homeowners’ Association (HOA), you must order HOA current documents used for closings for your Buyer’s review. The Buyers will have three days to review the documents. If during that time they find something in the HOA documents they do not like, they can void the contract.

Depending on the timeframe stated on your contract you are required to provide a Termite and Moisture Report. If there are problems with the results of the inspection, your

REALTOR® will walk you through the next steps.

You will need to anticipate other inspections which may include an appraisal on your home, a survey, inspection of a septic tank or well if used for drinking water and other inspections required by your contract. Your REALTOR® will let you know which inspections are required and whether the Buyer, or you as the Seller, pay for the inspection.

Other key players in your closing process include an attorney or a settlement agent. There are many other professionals involved in your closing, of which your REALTOR® will keep in contact with. If you can imagine a very long boat with many people on board with oars paddling the boat. Every member must have their oar moving forward. One oar not rowing or worse yet, going the other way will make a difference in the outcome of your closing.

You are just about ready to close. Your Buyer will have a Final Walk-Through of your house. The primary purpose is to allow the Buyer to see the property just before closing and to make certain that the property is in the condition they agreed to buy, that agreed-upon repairs, if any, were made and nothing has gone wrong with the home since the Buyer last looked at it. If all goes well, they then accept your house and go to closing. Congratulations!

This article only touches on some of the important parts of a Seller’s closing. To find out more about what to expect as a Seller contact your local REALTOR® or go to our Williamsburg Area Association of Realtors website www.WAAREaltor.com.

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Bob says the first rule is to let tall fescue be tall. "Let it grow to four inches and take an inch off," he instructs. "You'll be very happy. The root development will be four inches down, where you want it to be, and the lawn will look a lot better." Mowing height is a major issue: Use the top height setting on your mower.

Second, focus on soil conditions. Autumn is prime time to improve your lawn's soil. "The roots are not drills," Bob stresses. "They need to find ways to dig deep into the soil. Compact clay soil won't allow the roots to go deep. Core aeration is key."

Aeration of the lawn is the process of allowing air to mix in with the dirt by breaking up compacted soil. Usually, machines called core aerators run over the lawn plucking small plugs (or cores) from the ground and dropping them back into the turf.

"Rake in lots of well-composted material over the aerated ground," Bob says. "Some folks have their own compost piles, others can buy compost to spread. The compost re-aggregates our very dense clay soil. Most of the soil in the area is sandy, which is great, but when new houses are built, that soil is carted off. The turf is then put on the sub-soil, which is clay. Sod has trouble establishing on that hard clay sub-soil."

Third, know when and what type of fertilizer to apply. "Another thing homeowners need to be careful about is applying fertilizer at the right time and the right amount," Bob says. "A lot of folks, as soon as spring weather arrives, want to get out and put fertilizer down. That's the wrong time because spring fertilization promotes shoot growth. You're mowing the lawn twice a week, but the roots aren't growing. All the growth is going into the shoots." Now is the time. Fall fertilization enhances the roots because the shoot growth slows in preparation for cooler weather. "And it builds carbohydrate storage in the crown of the plant," Bob adds. "That is what will get the grass through the winter."

The fertilizer type derives from soil testing by Lawn Rangers. "Contact the Extension Agency," Bob advises. "The Lawn Rangers come out and measure the area so you know the amount of coverage you'll need and they test the soil." Different areas in Williamsburg, and maybe even within a neighborhood, need different proportions of nutrients, so soil testing is essential. Along with the nitrogen and phosphorus requirements, Bob checks the pH level of the soil for acidity. "We like to have the pH at 6.5, which is slightly acid, with 7.0 being neutral," he describes. "Jean and I just went

over to the new Blayton and Hornsby schools. They are required to have a soil nutrient plan. Their pH is 5.0, which is very acidic and would kill roots. A sign of low pH is moss. Moss likes acid soil, shade, over-watering, and doesn't like nutrients."

Another sign of unbalanced nutrients is a large growth of clover. "That's a sign of a lack of nitrogen in the soil," Bob says. "Clover is a legume and it makes its own nitrogen. It's very happy in a low-nitrogen soil."

If you want a superior turf, Bob suggests applying a pound (per thousand square feet) of nitrogen to your lawn in September, October, and November. "That's the SON rule," he says. "That will give you what you need to get the turf through the winter and all winter long the root system will develop. By spring, you'll have the basis for healthy growth." He adds that by following these principles, you will establish a strong root system and will need to irrigate less in the summer. A healthy, green and vibrant lawn will be your reward as the Lawn Rangers drive off into the sunset.

For more information on healthy lawns and the Turf Love program, contact the Virginia Cooperative Extension at (757) 564-2170. Also look for Turf Love information on TV Channel 48.

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