



It's Not Easy Being 'Green'

By Bryan Tolar, Tolar Capitol Partners

"It's not easy being green," goes the saying. As far back as 1975, the legendary country and blues singer Ray Charles of Georgia, USA, with the 1960's hit "Georgia on My Mind" recorded the song "Bein' Green."

"It's not easy being green," he sang. "It seems you blend in with so many other ordinary things, and people tend to pass you over ..."

It's not easy, either, for turfgrass growers and associated businesses, for whom "green" is

crucial to the industries they have built and the jobs they have created for so many. Their customers and the communities they serve strive to be green.

So perhaps it's fitting that it is Ray Charles' home state of Georgia that has produced a

turfgrass cultivar that demonstrates amazing potential: TifTuf bermudagrass is anything but ordinary. The environmental community, utility managers and economic developers are seemingly eager to embrace the water conservation characteristics of TifTuf.

How has this happened?

For well over a decade, in Georgia and in communities across the globe, outdoor water use has been vilified, often labeled as wasted water. The numerous benefits of turfgrass have been overwhelmed by the bully pulpit of government leaders and activists, their viewpoints regurgitated in media outlets that buy ink by the barrel. A conversation about turfgrass management has historically been a non-starter – until now.

Yes, green is the colour of spring... and TifTuf personifies the green of conservation, and for the first-time environment-focused communities are taking notice.

TifTuf has captured the attention of one of Georgia's fast-growing conservation communities, Athens-Clarke County. Normally this local government focuses on water re-use and storage, low-flow fixtures, and changes to lifestyle practices to conserve. They have now discovered the benefits of TifTuf through water conservation advocacy efforts of the Georgia Urban Agriculture Council, the state's premier green industry association for professionals involved in all sectors of the landscape industry.

In April 2021, the Athens-Clarke County Unified Government awarded the "Water Conservation Leadership Award Winner for an Individual" to Dr. Brian Schwartz and his work to produce the drought-tolerant bermudagrass TifTuf. The reduction of water use by 38% over the most popular bermudagrass cultivar and the expanded availability of TifTuf across the USA and in Australia were key to him winning this special, well deserved recognition.

In addition to being intensely focused on environmental stewardship, Athens-Clarke County also happens to be home to the University of Georgia (UGA), the flagship turfgrass research institution where the cultivar TifTuf was bred under the leadership of Dr. Schwartz and his turf research staff. TifTuf can be found on the beautiful and iconic quad of UGA's North Campus, covering the area between the famed

Arch and the UGA President's Office. It endures frequent foot traffic from students and tolerates moderate tree canopy shade, performing beautifully for more than five years.

Presenting the award, Athens-Clarke County's Water Conservation Coordinator Laurie Loftin acknowledged this: "Thank you, Dr. Schwartz, for your efforts to help us all use water efficiently while maintaining a beautiful lawn."

This was by no means the first special recognition of TifTuf or Dr. Schwartz, but it was the first by a local government with a laser focus on water conservation. In 2020, both the Georgia House of Representatives and Senate recognized TifTuf for its characteristics as a high quality turfgrass with extraordinary water conservation characteristics. In doing so, they also lauded the research of Dr. Schwartz, as well as his predecessor Dr. Wayne Hanna.

In addition, the Smart Approved Watermark label established by the Water Services Association of Australia (WSAA) is an important component of consumer recognition. With water use reduction of 38% over the most popular bermudagrass, the conservation benefit reputation resonates.

At the same time, there is an expectation that consumers and property managers take action to reduce irrigation and to adapt their turf management habits for TifTuf to make its mark. There is no doubt the Smart Approved WaterMark label educates consumers who clearly want to make informed choices when seeking products that use water efficiently, thus reducing per capita water consumption.

A recent move to advance the drought-tolerant characteristics of TifTuf in a large population center took place in June 2021. The metro area around Atlanta, Georgia, is the ninth largest and one of the fastest-growing metro areas in the United States. It serves over 6 million people and grew over 15% in the last decade. Oversight for water conservation and planning for the communities in this area is the responsibility of the Metro North Georgia Water Planning District. After months of engagement by landscape industry advocates, along with supporting testimony from Dr. Schwartz, the planning district's board voted to support and promote education to the public that



Georgia House of Representatives Houston Gaines with Dr. Schwartz



TifTuf on University of Georgia Campus near UGA President's Office

"encourages the installation of drought tolerant turf such as TifTuf."

This includes updating the district's printed and digital education materials on landscape and irrigation resources to include drought-tolerant turfgrasses. TifTuf is the only cultivar specifically mentioned.

Much as the song by Ray Charles begins as a self-pitying list of disadvantages of meeting the challenges of being green, it evolves into a full-throated embrace of the many benefits of being green. After all, as the song goes,

"Green is the colour of spring...I'm green and it'll do fine. It's beautiful and I think it's what I want to be!"

With over 25 years of research, TifTuf is now in its sixth year of commercial production

and expected to surpass 10,000 acres in the United States this year. By any measure, this is an incredible milestone for such a short time in commercial production. In 2020 alone, over 21.3 million square metres of TifTuf were installed, bringing the total to nearly 69.5 million square metres since its release in 2015.

So, what does this mean for being green? The 2020 figures indicate that over 41.7 billion litres of water have been saved through the use of TifTuf. As the strength of sales continues through 2021 and the future, we will soon see total installations exceed 93 million square metres. Imagine the billions of litres of water saved each year. Indeed, "It's beautiful and I think it is what I want to be," could be the TifTuf anthem.

TifTuf and the tireless efforts of Dr. Schwartz and others like him, along with many turf and landscape leaders, will continue to make being green even more positively impactful in the future. Sharing the TifTuf conservation story with those in the environmental community is deservedly a point of pride. Environmental stewardship is a responsibility we all share and to which we all can contribute.



2020 TifTuf Presentation to Drs. Schwartz and Hanna on UGA Campus. Far Right, Georgia Senator John Wilkinson

Congratulations to Dr. Brian Schwartz and the University of Georgia Turf Team on this special recognition of their water conservation leadership. TifTuf and the industry's continued dedication to research that advance water conservation objectives show that being green is indeed the best colour to be. The legendary Ray Charles says so.

BELOW: Presentation with Jackie Sherry, the Athens-Clarke County Program Education Specialist (L) and Laurie Loftin, the Athens-Clarke County Water Conservation Coordinator (R)

