

FOR ARTHUR J. MILBERGER— IT ALL STARTS WITH GRASS

By Suz Trusty



Arthur and Sue, daughters Regay, Lesley, and Whitney (at top) pose on the home farm turf with two family pups, Tootoot and Muffin, in 1985.

Arthur J. Milberger says, “My family started their sod business in 1947. I was born into the turf business in 1949, and we have remained in it ever since. My Dad, Francis Joseph (FJ), got back from World War II in 1945 and began working for the Texaco distributor. There were no commercial turf farms back then, so homeowners didn’t have a quick way to establish a lawn. He saw that as opportunity, comparing the 43,560 square feet to an acre to the average home yard in our area of Texas at 3,000 to 4,000 square feet. He started moonlighting, cutting strips of grass out of front yards, with permission of course, using a straight edge shovel with a turning hoe to cut through the thatch down to the hard clay. He turned that into sod blocks sold during the Texas post-war building boom.

FJ leased several native St. Augustine fields before buying four acres of land in 1950 and building their home on it. He put in over two acres of planting stock from those home lawns, watering them with a four-horsepower gasoline pump and a long canvas hose. Arthur says, “My Mom, Lillian, built and operated a chicken and egg business on the back acre. They were unbelievable business partners for the next 70 years.”

Growing the Business

In the early 1950s, FJ quit his day job and expanded from four acres to 84, choosing a site with good water and black gumbo soil. Arthur says, “He started exploring improved grass varieties, testing grasses from Texas A&M. He brought in his first 328 Tifgreen purple tag foundation grass from Dr. Burton with Georgia Crop Improvement in 1956. In 1958, we all moved to the 84-acre property in Bay City, Texas. We had planted a few acres of grass that season, but ran out of time to put in more, so he planted the rest of the acreage to cotton. Thank God, the cotton crop was a wet disaster or FJ might have turned to cotton over turfgrass. That cotton tow sack was way too heavy to drag through the gumbo mud!

Typical of farming, Arthur and his younger brother, Bryan, worked together with FJ from the time they were old enough to be helpful in the fields. He says, “From those early days on, the only way we moved the business forward was centered on other turfgrass producers first, turf suppliers second, and turf educators—researchers third. The knowledge we gained from all of them is what propelled our family in the sod production business.”

New sod fields, grown from plugs, did not develop thatch during the first year which made it difficult to harvest the hard clay. So, FJ and Lillian devised a crazy-looking machine that attached to the three point hook-up on a tractor. “A hefty guy sat on the back to add weight to it. It had side coulters with chopping blades that cut into the turf at one foot intervals, and a straight edge plow on back to flip the sod out. In the 1960s we brought in Ryan sod cutters and had 14 or 15 of them working the fields. It took up to 20 men to cut one-foot by one-foot blocks; stack them nine-high to equal one square yard, and load 1,000 of those stacks on the trailer of a truck. We’d send the loaded trucks to Theodore Mund, JR Miller, and Jimmy Anderton,



FJ Milberger in 1971 on the Certified Tifway 419 field, the first certified turf field in Texas. This field has been in continuous certification since 1971.

grass buyers in North Texas, and to Farmer Brothers in Central Texas. Adding the Hyster forklift, also in the 1960s, helped speed up the loading and unloading.”

Gerry Brouwer brought one of the first prototype automatic harvesters to the Bay City area in 1970. “The machine worked well in the sandy soils of Canada, but not on our black gumbo,” says Arthur. “Gerry kept tweaking it, working with FJ and other growers, and by 1971 had it working for harvesting clay slabs. Around that time, Woodrow Wilson brought the Princeton harvester into our area which had a bit more down pressure.”

Branching Out

Arthur excelled in football and track in high school, while working on the sod farm part-time through the school year and full-time in the summers. He was a walk-on in Gene Stallings football program during his freshman year at Texas A&M, but after finishing two-a-day practices at 130 pounds, down from 160, decided he needed a new sport. He transferred to the University of Texas at Austin, made the UT wrestling team and, feeling he had a solid agronomic background, focused on the other skill set he’d need to succeed in the turfgrass industry. He graduated in 1971 with a Business Honors Program Degree and a Bachelor of Business Administration Degree. He’d worked full-time on the sod farm during the summers and his parents helped fund his undergraduate studies. Bryan majored in turfgrass management, earning his degree from Texas A&M.

Arthur Milberger and Sue Krenek married in the summer of 1972. When he entered St. Mary’s Law School in San Antonio that fall, financing a law degree was his responsibility. His entrepreneurial spirit took flight, beginning what would become a life-long pattern of innovative enterprise, with Sue as his business partner as well as his spouse. He started a new business, Milberger Landscaping, to work his way through law school. While at St. Mary’s, Sue earned her degree and began teaching, helping their cash flow. She also kept Arthur organized with the business.

He says, “I’d sleep four hours at night, put in eight hours in classes and the law school library, and concentrate on landscaping, planting trees, shrubs and laying sod, from noon until it was too dark to work. Since nearly all the other law students needed some income, too, I had over 20 of them working for me at \$2.00 an hour. Now, I couldn’t hire any of them for less than \$1,000 an hour.”

He earned his Juris Doctorate degree in 1974; was licensed to practice law by the Supreme Court of Texas in 1975; and has maintained active status in the Texas State Bar since then. Milberger Landscaping continues as well. He added the retail garden center, which has become a thriving and well-known shoppers’ favorite, and expanded beyond residential landscaping into commercial landscaping, irrigation and interior/exterior maintenance. Milberger’s



The family gathered at the home farm for this 2013 Easter photo. Left to right: Shane and Regay Hildreth with Audrey and James; Clint and Whitney Laird with Wyatt; Sue and Arthur Milberger; Lesley and Shaun Shoaf with Cole and Eric. (Reid Laird not yet born)

Landscaping & Nursery, Inc. now employs 250 people full-time plus 99 H2B seasonal workers about nine months of the year. “It’s been my bread and butter,” says Arthur. “I’ve founded, bought and sold lots of companies over the years, but I’ve kept it as the base. No matter what the business, grass has always been involved. I hired Butch Jouffray in 1980. Butch brought landscape experience to the table, and he’s now my partner in Milberger’s in San Antonio. It’s all about the relationships—you make good choices in people and build from there.”

Meanwhile, back on the sod farm, FJ was making inroads as well. On September 11, 1970, application for certification of a 419 Tifway bermudagrass field was submitted to the Texas Plant Board for approval under the Texas Certification program. On June 8, 1971, a special committee composed of Dr. Richard Duple, Al Novasad, and Harry Forbes accepted this first certified field under the Texas Certified Seed Program. Arthur says, “That field has been in continuous certification since 1971, making it the oldest field of certified grass in history. Fields of 328 Tifgreen and Tifdwarf also were certified that day.”

Arthur reports FJ was always great about sharing information with other growers and they shared it with him. In 1972, FJ, along with Theodore Mund, Charles Davis, Leonard Wittig, JR Miller, Morris Brown, JR May, Irving Boerger and RM Cole, founded the Texas Sod Producers. FJ became the first President. A few other states were forming associations, too. These founders also pulled from their ASPA experience. “The ASAP educators were instrumental in that process, especially Dr. Henry Indyk of Rutgers, as the industry was growing faster up north,” says Arthur. “The educators were the most likely to travel around from state to state, speaking at conferences

and symposiums. They encouraged the development of sod production and sod producers as a separate and vital part of the overall turfgrass industry.”

With law school completed and one business running smoothly, Arthur’s entrepreneurial spirit kicked in again. In 1975, he became founder and president of Milberger Turf Sales in Houston, TX. In 1976, he joined Milberger Turf Farms, Inc., in Bay City, as a partner, making it an “official” family business. Sue took over Marketing for the Milberger Companies while finishing up her Masters Degree in Special Education from University of Houston.

Around 1978, Arthur connected with another long-time friend, David Doguet, 1997-1998 TPI President. “David got his start researching and experimenting with different turfgrasses in his early days in the industry working with FJ at our Farms. David continued expanding on that research through his highly successful Bladerunner Farms breeding operations in Poteet, TX. He also helped me with the buy out of Crenshaw Turfgrass, and then Elsberry Greenhouses. They had the most success in pursuing grass plug tray sales through mass merchandisers, which paved our future into the big box stores.”

In both the sod production and retail nursery companies, business dwindles after the spring rush. Arthur wanted diversification to fill the gap from June to September. So, in 1978, he decided to explore the golf and sports turf business. He says, “We’d been growing sprigs and sod for golf courses since 1956 and delivering it to them, but we’d not tackled the installation or custom growing. When I expressed interest in getting into that side of the business, TPI members Bill and Jim Roquemore and Ben Copeland of Patten Seed Co./Super Sod invited me to Georgia to look at custom-made sprigging equipment. Their willingness to share at that level propelled us into another income source, again all connected by TPI turfgrass growers.”



This is the harvester developed by FJ Milberger.

Arthur and FJ started attending ASPA Conventions in the 1970s and his networking opportunities expanded on both the national and international levels. That didn’t lessen his concentration in his Texas businesses and the associations related to them. He and Sue, always a team, found a way

to blend business, association involvement, friendships and family—and have fun doing it. And, as their family grew, their three girls fit right in and became team players, too.

Giving Back

Arthur felt it was important to give back to the industry through service to the associations that support and connect the members. He focused on serving in the Texas turf-related associations prior to taking a leadership role at the national level. He started serving on the College of Agriculture Development Council for Texas A&M in 1984, a position he still holds. His stint with the Turf Producers of Texas began with a Board position in 1988 and continued through the President and then Past President slots, ending in 1992. He followed the same path with the Texas Turfgrass Association beginning in 1992 and ending in 1996. He first joined the Board of Trustees of Turfgrass Producers International (TPI) in 1998 and moved through the ranks to serve as President for 2006-2007 and Past President in 2007-2008, a span of ten years. He also served on the Board of Directors of The Lawn Institute (TLI) in 2000. In addition, he is a Past President and Board member for various Growers Associations under the University of Georgia Research Foundation: the TifEagle Growers Association from 1998 through 2008; and the Seashore Paspalum Growers Association and TifSport Growers Association from 2002 through 2004.

Many of these positions entail up to 8 meetings a year, including the Conferences and Conventions, plus hours of additional work in preparation and follow-up. Though the commitment is great, Arthur says, “It has certainly repaid countless dividends over the years. The opportunity to meet, work with and develop friendships with these wonderful people is incredible—and I don’t think that ever ends.” “You can get your foot in the door with grass,” Arthur says with a chuckle. “We worked on the sod and landscaping for the Crawford, TX, ranch of U.S. President George W. Bush. He appointed me to a Board position on the Lower Colorado River Association (LCRA) where I served from 1998 through 2004. While I was Water Committee Chair at LCRA, I oversaw the purchase of the last large remaining water rights on the Lower Colorado River from private land owners, thereby securing future water needs and availability for the Colorado River basin, 140,000 acre-feet of water. My Board oversaw development of three Eco-Tourism Parks in Texas, including Matagorda Bay Nature Park in Matagorda County. In addition, I’ve been a member of the Tributary League for the preservation of the Colorado River since 2008.”

Arthur and Sue established the Sequor Foundation in 1996. He is currently president and she is vice-president. Sequor funded the Texas A&M Endowed Chair for Children-at-Risk in the Parks, Recreation and Tourism Department under the College of Agriculture. The Milbergers recently funded another ten-year project, the Youth Development

Initiative (YDI), in the PRT Department. Arthur says, “YDI has positioned itself as the recognized center and resource for youth development programs. It’s all focused on providing Best Practices to the Practitioners and staff in all phases of youth development, especially in programs involving kids at risk. We were able to start with our investment in the foundation and, though the relationships we’ve established over the years, parlay that with some matching grants to the million-dollar level for the first Chair initiative and another half-million for the YDI.” In their spare time, Sue and Arthur both served terms on local School Boards.



One building of the new Tenaris plant, currently under construction on a former Milberger turfgrass farm, will have 35 acres under one roof.

Growing and Changing

Arthur served on the World Cup Research Team for Indoor Turf with Dr. James B Beard in 1994 proving turf could be grown indoors with the right grass and lighting. That led to Milberger Turf Farms’ involvement with washed sod and modular turf squares. It was the beginning of a long friendship with the Aussies, which influenced the 2007 TPI convention being held in Australia when Arthur was President.

In 1998-1999, Arthur worked with Ike Thomas of Thomas Bros. Grass to co-found Turfgrass America, Inc. (TGA). Arthur says, “It became the largest consolidation and roll-up of turf farms and turf retail centers in the United States, covering multiple states and thousands of acres of grass. The Collier Group of Florida bought out a majority interest in 2004. Then in 2007, our group sold TGA to King Ranch. I stayed on to serve as the golf and sports director and coordinate the licensing of the proprietary turfgrasses until retiring in 2010 to pursue several business ventures, including sod. I do miss working with the incredible folks at King Ranch, like Kevin Joyce and Thomas Kulak. We still lease some of our turf farms to King Ranch and to other turf farmers, and we still own and operate several original Milberger Farms.

We’re down to 15 turf varieties at our Farms, which is considerably less stress than our high of 42! That includes

TifTuf which we licensed in 2016 from The Turfgrass Group/UGARF. FJ would want us to continue our long winning streak with Dr. Burton, Dr. Elsner, Dr. Hanna, Dr. Duncan and many more great Georgia folks dating back to 1956. The Georgia relationships also set the stage for Arthur establishing farms in Mexico, Malaysia, and two unconventional sod farms: an Indian Reservation in Arizona and a Prison Farm in California.

Other Ventures

Along the way, Arthur branched into various forms of real estate and mineral development, including acquiring farms for production of corn, maize, rice, and cotton, and the mineral rights for properties. He’s also kept up his hours and is licensed to practice law, the majority focusing on Trust work.

Sue and Arthur started a 52,000-square foot entertainment center on one of the grass farms. “It’s a partnership with the City of Bay City, TX; Mark Schulman’s SMBG, LLC; and my family. We are contributing land for an ownership interest in the project. Currently under construction, phase one will include: 12 bowling lanes, eight theater screens, a games room, party rooms, a restaurant, and more.”

In 2004, Arthur started a cow/calf operation, Live Oak Ranch, with a partner, Lindsay Thompson, a long-time friend from college days. “We grow grass for cows,” says Arthur. “We started our herd with all Registered Brangus bulls, a cross of Brahman and Angus, we purchased from David Doguet’s brother, Mike, a Brangus breeder and turfgrass farmer in Beaumont, TX.”

Sue launched an enterprise in 2007, Karankawa Village. It’s an eight-room, boutique lodge and mercantile store in Matagorda, TX, on the Gulf of Mexico, minutes from the harbor and great fishing. Arthur says, “She does the heavy lifting with that one. I just asked her to have three things there for me—big screen TV, beer and cigars.”

In 2010, Arthur’s Milberger Nurseries bought the 300-acre Peerless Tree Farm in Big Foot, TX, a logical tie-in for the retail garden center and landscaping business.

In another connection with TPI friend David Doguet, Arthur partnered with Dr. Milt Engelke in 2013 to form Team Zoysia International, LLC. The company serves as the international licensing agent for all of Bladerunner Farms’ proprietary zoysiagrasses. Arthur says, “Milt is a great turfgrass breeder and a very good business partner. We have several growers licensed in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam, Brazil, Mexico, Panama, Spain, and are now expanding into Australia.”

Will Nugent and the Real Estate Deal

The latest collaboration with a TPI Past President involves Will Nugent, 2015-2016, Bethel Farms, Arcadia, FL, and the initiator of the Harmony Outdoor Brands concept. Arthur refers to him as an “extraordinary guy,” and this

collaboration is a prime example of that. Arthur reports he had a couple farms for which the King Ranch lease had expired. He approached Will about leasing part of one of them, a thousand-acre property near Van Vleck, just outside Bay City, to supply the sod for the Harmony Outdoor Brands customers in that area. They had negotiated a five-year lease on 700 acres of that farm. Will had made a tremendous investment in establishing the grasses on that property during the first year and had planned more planting during the second year, expecting to continue development throughout the terms of the lease.

While the Milberger properties were water-secure with strategically placed wells, much of the county relied on access to water from the Lower Colorado River Authority (LCRA). Arthur says, "LCRA reduced the water allotment, in effect cutting off the water supply to those dependent rice and sod farms in Matagorda County, which includes Bay City." Arthur recognized the severity of the problem and the struggles the county was facing. So he saw the pros and cons when the Argentina-based Tenaris company, the largest manufacturer of seamless steel pipe in the world, expressed interest in building a manufacturing facility on 1,500 acres, including all of the farm that Will was leasing. Arthur says, "Tenaris wanted to buy, not lease, the property they needed and I really didn't want to sell it. But the potential county-wide impact of a two-billion-dollar pipe building company was incredible. First, I got Sue's blessing on the project and then I approached Will about the possible sale. Most people would have told me to bug off." Instead, Will said, "Let's talk about it."

They met and discussed the many positives and negatives on both sides of the equation. "A potential impossible situation became a straightforward evaluation, weighted heavily by Will's compassion and overall concern for the welfare of the people within the county," reports Arthur. "He agreed to void the lease as of July 2013, allowing him to harvest the sod that would be sales-ready by then, along with a financial settlement that left a bit of profit for both our companies. Because of Will Nugent, Tenaris is generating employment for hundreds of subcontractors and their thousands of workers and, once the construction is completed, will be hiring 600 employees."

Family, Friends and Memories

None of this, the industry-focused service and "tons of business startups and rollups and sold downs," would have been possible without the strong support of Sue and the girls. "Family is the heart of our business," says Arthur. "You're all in it together. The roles and responsibilities change over the years, but the strength of family remains the core."

Daughter Regay is married to Shane Hildreth. They have a daughter, Audrey, and a son, James Arthur. Regay formed a marketing company, RHM Marketing, which operates out of her office building in Houston. Lesley and her husband, Shaun Shoaf, live in San Antonio with their two sons, Cole and Eric. Lesley worked at Milberger Landscaping &



TPI friends gather at the Harbor next to Karankawa Village after the 2013 Conference. Left to right: Chip and Shari Lain, Rob and Wendy Davey, David and Sheri Doguet, Randy and Betsy Graff, Arthur and Sue Milberger, Jim and Kathy Keeven, and Tommy Keeven.

Nursery prior to taking time off to be a stay-at-home mom. With the boys now in Pre-K and Kindergarten, she's again involved in the business, currently researching new business opportunities. Youngest daughter Whitney is married to Clint Laird. They have two sons, Wyatt and Reid. Whitney earned her Masters Degree from Texas A&M with her thesis focus on water conservation. She works for Mausuen Consulting developing water strategies for water districts and big urban irrigation users.

A strong network of working relationships that grows into life-long friendships is at the root of the turfgrass industry. Steady, reliable, dependable and hard-working, these folks find balance in those friendships and having fun together. Arthur and Sue thoroughly enjoy all of these get-togethers, including the post-TPI Conference gatherings, especially when they have the opportunity to host them.

Obviously, hospitality is part of the Milberger family DNA, so of course they welcomed an Australian study tour group into their Bay City home in 2009. A week of "show and tell" in the sod production operations was balanced by highlights of the Lone Star state. The Aussies wrapped up their trip by attending the July 27-31 TPI Summer Convention and Field Day in East Lansing, Michigan.

Growing Again

In 2014, Arthur became a partner in, and president of, Milberger Turfgrass, LLC, the center of their grass-related enterprises. So now he's back to turfgrass production, and sublicensing of different products, along with a plethora of other endeavors. Life is less stressful without the golf/sports division which resides at King Ranch now, and Sue and Arthur can enjoy all six grandkids.

As Arthur says, "All of these enterprises have a unique synergism. You create one to serve the other; and though it doesn't always end up with growing grass, it all comes about because of the grass business."

Suz Trusty is co-editor of *Turf News*.

All photos courtesy of Arthur J. Milberger.

