

YOUNG ENTREPRENEUR of the YEAR



SEAN FONG

President and Owner, Hawaiian Turfgrass Inc.

★ SPONSORS: DAN YOKOO AND ISRAEL AVILLA,
BANK OF HAWAII ★

SEAN FONG was still in college when he decided to grow a business out of grass.

Agriculture isn't a common choice for young entrepreneurs, but Fong, who hails from Hilo, knew he wanted a career outdoors. A class in turfgrass production at UH-Manoa offered the inspiration he needed.

Fong – now 31 and a new father – has put his profits back into his company since he launched it in 2006, growing a single one-seventh of an acre grass plot cultivated by hand into a 67.5-acre farm in the Mililani Agricultural Park run by eight employees. Hawaiian Turfgrass now grows enough grass to cover football fields at a time and Fong says his company is the only local grower with the equipment to install 4-by-100-foot rolls of sod.

“When we started out, we were just selling grass. We became landscape contractors and started installing lawns and sprinklers,” Fong says of the company’s evolution. “It’s pretty much been my life for this last eight years. It’s been my dream and I pretty much just went full blast.”

Dan Yokoo is a VP and the banking center manager for Bank of Hawaii in Waikiki and one of the people who sponsored Fong for the SBA Awards. He says he’s impressed with the determination and dedication that makes Fong a good role model for young entrepreneurs.

“Sean chose to go into an industry that very few young entrepreneurs ever consider,” Yokoo explains. “He had the discipline to sink every penny he earned right back into his business by investing in equipment and technology designed to make the work easier and more efficient.”



PHOTOS: COURTESY OF HAWAIIAN TURFGRASS INC.



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This spring, Fong will use his high-tech sod-installation equipment to resod the Moanalua High School football field, the biggest job Hawaiian Turfgrass has taken on. Fong credits the company’s success to its ability to expand and bring in new equipment and proprietary grasses that require less water and fertilizer and provide more of a “wow factor.” Fong says he frequently travels to trade shows and industry conventions to find out what other successful grass growers are up to and belongs to a network of farms that uses the same high-quality grass all over the world.

As Yokoo notes, “These new strains take over three years to quarantine and propagate before they are ready to bring to market. In this fast-paced world of instant gratification, Sean demonstrates the patience and tenacity necessary to grow a successful business.”

– TREENA SHAPIRO