



Photos by Marco Niconich

UNIVERSITY SCIENTISTS

STUDY CEMETERY GRASS

By Bob Ratliff

Since last summer, drivers along Highway 82 near the Mississippi State University campus have been inquiring about the school's cemetery.

The rows of white, round-topped "tombstones" visible from the highway adjacent to MSU's North Farm don't mark final resting places. They are, instead, part of a turf grass research project.

"This is an economic-type study where we're looking for grass that can give us the best looking and performing turf for a cemetery with the least amount of maintenance," said Wayne Philley, a research associate with the Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station at MSU.

Last summer, six different turf grasses were installed as sod on the North Farm. The grasses on the plot include St. Augustine, zoysia, centipede, Tifway Bermuda and two Bermuda varieties developed at MSU—Mississippi Choice and Mississippi Supreme.

The tombstones are actually wood painted and cut to a size and shape to resemble markers in national cemeteries.

"Everything we're doing simulates as much

as possible what you would encounter in a cemetery," Philley said. "The grass received just a minimum amount of fertilizer when it was sodded. Since then it's been Mother Nature taking care of it. There's been no irrigation, no additional fertilization or anything else."

The grass is mowed on a regular basis during the growing season—usually when it reaches a height of about 3 inches, which is marked on each of the simulated tombstones.

At the end of the 3-year study, the university's Department of Plant and Soil Sciences will release its findings on which of the tested grasses offers the best quality turf and require the least mowing and other maintenance in a cemetery setting.

"Cemetery maintenance is something a lot of landscape firms do as part of their routine work," Philley said. "If we can provide those businesses with data that will reduce the number of times they have to mow or do other maintenance, it will have some real economic benefits. This study can also provide guidelines for individuals and volunteer groups who maintain many of Mississippi's small rural cemeteries."