

Agronomist

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What does an Agronomist do?

I am the Research Lead for Sports Turf Research Institute (STRI), Australia. My job from day to day involves a number of different roles and is quite diverse. I manage a number of research trials mainly in turfgrass on the Redlands Research Station, in Cleveland east of Brisbane. I also undertake turf consultancy and research offsite. Some of the day to day operations of being the research lead involve,

- Physical management of the trial plots, e.g mowing, spraying, trial specific maintenance such as specific applications of new industry chemicals, pesticides, fertilisers, seed and soil/amendments
- Developing new research trial work by developing new applications and outcomes that will aid turfgrass managers.
- Developing business by approaching companies to offer our research and consultancy services.
- Brainstorming and identifying gaps in the industry that require our research and a wider industry understanding.
- Developing protocols and designing trials in terms of their layout, types of measurements to test, and specific treatment applications that will have scientific rigour but also offer simple focused outcomes for clients.
- Collecting, analysing and interpreting the data from the research trials. Writing the report in an easy-to-follow manner to help clients and industry understand the research findings.
- Presenting the research outcomes to the industry at conferences and open days.

What do you work in and what is your specialty?

The industry I work in is the turfgrass industry this covers all aspects of the industry including:

- Turf production
- Golf Courses
- Race Courses
- Lawn Bowls
- Stadiums
- Community sports fields
- Schools
- Amenity areas
- Machinery and products that are used on turfgrass

Any area that has turfgrass is applicable to my career.

My specialty in the area is research, I come up with new ways to look at products and innovative ways of dealing with problems in the turfgrass industry.

How did you become interested in this area and when did you first start?

I became interested in the area when I began doing agricultural science at high school in grade 9. I realised that I enjoyed the agriculture and horticulture field and it was definitely a field I could see myself working in.

What study path have you taken to get here?

While I was in high school at Ferny Grove State High I first did Agricultural Science as a subject in grade 9. When I knew I wanted to work in the field I tailored my subjects in my last 3 years of high school towards what would help me get a good base understanding for university. The subjects I did were:

- Agricultural Science
- Geography
- English
- Mathematics B
- Chemistry
- Biology

Once I finished high school in 2006 I got the marks required to get into university and do a Bachelor of Agricultural Science (Plant and Soils). The course started out as a broader understanding of Agricultural Science and in the last 2 years I specialised my course towards a specific area. I tailored my subjects towards plant and soil science. With this in mind I was able to specialise even further as careers in Agricultural Science (Plant and Soil) can be crop specific. With my interest in the area and help from my supervisors and peers at university I tailored my degree towards turfgrass science. In my last 2½ years of university I worked as a casual field assistant for the QLD government when they did turf research.

With the degree being a 4 year course and the last year having honours included I graduated from university midway through 2011. Part of my undergraduate degree was a small research trial in the glasshouses at University of Queensland. This involved screening 11 turfgrasses to herbicides. 60 pots of each turfgrass (660 pots in total) were planted in early spring 2010 the pots were flooded in 2011 floods in January. This set my research trial back another six months and pushed my graduation back to mid-2011. This was a challenging and patience testing period in itself, but you can't change the weather.

Once I graduated I was lucky enough to work part time as a field officer for QLD government and then became full time in early 2012. I worked for a further year with QLD government then moved roles as a researcher/extension officer for a small business Bioscience Australia where we undertook research for turf producers. In August 2014 I began working for STRI as a research officer and mid 2015 became research lead for STRI Australia.

What do you like most about your job?

There is a lot to like about my job. It is a very diverse role and I get to see and do new things every day. One of the big advantages of doing research is that everything you work on is new and innovative and you get an understanding and knowledge before it reaches industry. In doing so, you learn and progress in the role.

Do you have any particular highlights?

A career highlight for me has been recently being flown by STRI over to the research station and home base in England to present on an innovative system for turfgrass that we have been researching and developing for the last 3 years.

Due to most of the research trials I work on being 1-2 year projects I have a lot of mini highlights and milestones that I enjoy. The process of taking a piece of research through the entire process from an idea, to development, to engaging clients, designing the protocol, setting up the trial, applying trial

treatments and trial specific maintenance, and interpreting and presenting the data to clients and industry is very rewarding.

What advice would you give to someone interested in working in this area?

A few pieces of advice I would give would be:

- Know what it is you exactly what field of agricultural science or horticultural science it is that interests you. If you aren't interested in the field it is hard to be motivated and pursue a career in the field
- Be persistent in pursuing your career, there will be set-backs and there will be times where you ask yourself 'Why am I doing this?' remember the reasons you started doing it and use this as your motivation.
- Make your own path. Don't pursue a career because it sounds like a good idea or what all your friends are doing. Pursue a career because it is what you want to do.
- Ask questions. I know it's a cliché but there are no dumb questions and most professionals in the field are ever-willing to help someone who is keen.
- Don't be afraid to fail along the way, pick yourself back up and fail again. Don't forget that some of sciences great findings and learning's have come from failure
- Throw yourself into your career. Read a lot about your industry and try and do casual and part time work with-in your industry while you are going through your study. It helps you form ideas, network and gives you context of the industry you work in.