

ZERO-TURN MOWERS: ARE THEY ALL THE SAME?



Kubota zero-turn mowers are all diesel powered, the pictured ZD28 topping the four-model line-up. Powered by a 28hp engine it can be specified with a choice of 1.52m side- or rear-discharge deck.

By James de Havilland

In the USA, the way in which grass is mown differs from the approach in the UK and Europe. These differences, however, go beyond accounting for climate, grass types, cut and collect systems and a host of other practical constraints.

In the US, they prefer to ride on a mower than walk behind it. Consider the heat of a typical US summer and this approach makes a great deal of sense. It is also a key to the popularity of the zero-turn. These mowers can be used in restricted areas that in Europe would typically be mown by pedestrian kit.

When zero-turn mowers first made their way from the US to Europe, however, these mowers received a fairly mixed reception from professional operators. With a degree of generalisation, some of the early imports were not built for intensive commercial applications, while those that were included were designs with too shallow a deck to cope with long, wet grass. Almost universal use of petrol engines did not help either.

Despite the fact that the zero-turn market has now matured in the UK, there remain some entrenched views that a zero-turn is not as suitable as a similar capacity out-front rotary for heavy use. The reality is that there are some pretty serious,

heavy duty zero-turn models on the market. Think Ariens, Ferris, Iseki, Kubota, Scag, Great Dane and Grasshopper for starters. In fact there is what now seems to be an ever-growing range of commercial quality zero-turn models offered in the UK.

In the golf sector, it is natural to perhaps think first of the models offered by the 'big three', John Deere, Ransomes-Jacobsen and Toro. And with good reason. These manufacturers know the UK market, and the key models offered by the companies in the UK are well suited to golf course users.

So is it fair to say all zero-turn mowers are the same? Well no. For starters, there are models, that include the Gizmow, that have a steering wheel as opposed to steering levers. Ferris units have a front suspension system. Grasshopper models have a four-wheel chassis, with rear castor wheels enabling the mower skid to operate a range of attachments and not just a deck.

A particularly interesting departure from the 'norm' is the Convertible Mower. This model can be operated both as a ride-on or pedestrian zero-turn. The idea is that in applications where an operator may have reservations about sitting on the machine, such as a steep bank, he can switch to pedestrian mode. On the level, he can then switch back to ride-on mode. This is an interesting idea,

and one that just shows how the term zero-turn should not be used to group all mowers of this type under the same headings.

So how much will a zero-turn cost to run?

Costing a mower of any description will always be complicated by the amount of work done, purchase price of the machine and how long it is kept in service. With a zero-turn, it perhaps helps to also look at how the unit could be used to reduce another cost, such as using a brushcutter.

If the zero-turn shows potential to save costs, these need to be considered. As to costs of running a zero turn, you can do some basics by taking the purchase price and writing it down over a period of five years. Assume the money to buy the machine has to be financed at a rate of say 6% per annum. Then factor in service, insurance and maintenance, this typically weighing in at 5% or so of the purchase price.

Next you need to work out typical annual usage and labour plus fuel costs. If this seems a bit tiresome, an all-in guide cost per hour will range from £16.50 to £22.00. This is based upon labour at £10 and fuel at £1.40 per hour and a 500 hour annual workload. If the latter seems high, consider how these mowers can be used in place of a brushcutter. Most users find a zero-turn is worked harder than initially anticipated.



The John Deere Z Trak 997 can be fitted with a side or rear discharge deck, tough units made from heavy 4.5 mm thick steel. The 44 litre fuel tank should be enough to keep the 31hp diesel engine fed for a full day of mowing.



Pro-Stance 1934 and Pro-Stance 1948 'stand-on' zero turn mowers are powered by a Kawasaki 19hp V-twin petrol engines and have respective deck widths of 0.86 and 1.22m with mulch kit option. Narrow width is a key to these machines appeal, particularly where access is restricted by pedestrian gates.



Powered by a 24hp Kawasaki V-twin petrol engine, the LP25KAW Convertible mower can be specified with a choice of 1.21m, 1.32m or 1.55m deck. Show working in pedestrian mode, the same mower can be converted to a ride-on, without any tools, in a couple of minutes.



Toro Groundsmaster 7200 series 28hp zero-turn mowers can be fitted with a choice of decks, including 1.58 and 1.83 Guardian recycler units. Made from heavy steel, the decks are claimed to be extremely tough and leave a really good finish.



Grasshopper zero-turn models have a four-wheel chassis, this enabling the mower to work with a range of attachments that can include a debris blower or brush. Pictures unit is fitted with a collection system. This is the sort of zero-turn that could well convert existing out-front rotary users.



The 33 hp Iseki SZ330 is among the most power zero-turn models, its large 1.83m deck enabling it to match tight turning with a high level of productivity. Large driving and big front castor wheels useful for work on rougher ground.



Powered by a 20hp Yanmar diesel, the Ransomes ZT220D has a 1.50m deck. Small and nippy, this mower is ideally suited to working in and around trees, flower borders and other obstacles.