Three seasoned landscape contractors talk about how they use equipment maintenance products to keep their operations running smoothly.

Landscape operations wouldn’t be complete without today’s selection of maintenance products required to keep their equipment running.

Popular shelf items include oil, filters, grease, replacement blades, blade sharpeners, belts, hoses and light bulbs — just to name a few.

Many contractors stick with one brand or manufacturer when purchasing various categories of equipment to make their inventories and part replacements simpler. They also troubleshoot problems early and call for outside technical assistance when needed.

On a scale of one to 10, contractors give preventative maintenance a 10 when it comes to keeping equipment costs down and service hours up. But they also know when it’s time to give up that beloved walk-behind or trimmer.

We decided to ask three readers to give us their views on their own personal maintenance programs. Here is what they had to say: continued next page
LARGE CONTRACTOR

Name: Mike Rorie  
Title: President/Owner  
Company: Groundmasters, Inc.  
Location: Cincinnati, OH  
2000 revenues: $9 million  
Business mix: 100% commercial  
Employees: 125  
Company profile: Began business in 1979, servicing primarily residential accounts. By 1982, Rorie's vision was to create a large equipment-intensive business, so the commercial market became the focal point of his operation. Today, his company is completely devoted to commercial accounts, catering to more than 500 sites. Maintenance services make up the lion's share of the contract work. The business grew throughout the '80s to about $1 million in revenue. In the '90s, Rorie added a facility in Cincinnati, Dayton and northern Kentucky. Today, the company employs 125 people, and revenues topped $9 million in 2000.

Equipment arsenal: Over 80 trucks, 30-plus trailers and over 400 pieces of additional equipment — everything from tractors to weedeaters.

Maintenance plan: An in-house, five-member fleet department at each branch managed by a fleet manager. "We do all our own preventative maintenance — whether it's a skid loader or a lawn mower." Maintenance/repair work is done the quarter of the year prior to the quarter of production — lawnmowers are fixed in the winter and snowplows in August. The fleet manager determines the standards the company follows when servicing a piece of equipment. "We don't want to underservice or overservice." Will send out the occasional engine overhaul or transmission repair work to an outside mechanic.

Maintenance budget (labor and parts): About 2% of total revenue. Company tries to determine the operation costs of a piece of equipment when developing a preventative maintenance budget. "Contractors need to track equipment just like job costs. We put hour meters on everything. It's the easiest way to track usage and determine preventative maintenance."

An inside job: "Hiring a mechanic will depend on the money you've invested in equipment and the money and time involved in going back and forth to get repairs done on the outside. You'll want someone who is readying the equipment as well as repairing and servicing it."

Parts inventory: Company stocks all the routine parts such as belts, hoses, filters, coils, hydraulic fluids, light bulbs, wipers and tires. All of these parts are part of its preventative maintenance checks. "If we need a new alternator or water pump, we'll access that part through one of our mechanic, but company is looking to hire its own part-time mechanic for equipment repair and maintenance work.

Parts inventory: "We used to stock a fair amount of parts but found that it was a waste. Now we only stock oil, grease, mowing blades, maybe one round of oil and air filters and anything that we must have on hand at all times. Replacement parts are purchased from our mechanic. We also try to stick with the same brand whether it's a blower or trimmer."

Cleaning/painting: "We have a hard time doing painting and cleaning because we don't have great access to water to wash equipment and trucks. Still, we try to

MEDIUM CONTRACTOR

Name: Kris Hjort  
Title: President/Owner  
Company: K & H Lawn Services, Inc.  
Location: Fairfax, VA  
2000 revenues: $1.8 million  
Business mix: 80% residential, 20% commercial  
Employees: 10 full-time  
Company profile: Started business in 1984. About 55% of services are devoted to maintenance, 30% to design and installation, 14% to turf and ornamental and 1% to snow removal.

Equipment arsenal: Three pick-up trucks and four stake body trucks Four of company's five vans are Super Lawn trucks. Other equipment includes 20 backpack blowers, 20 trimmers, seven stick edgers and an array of walk-behind mowers and riders.

Maintenance plan: Company performs minor maintenance such as oil changes on their trucks. Greasing and blade sharpening on other pieces of equipment are performed on a daily basis. Major repairs are sent to an outside mechanic.

Maintenance budget (parts and labor): About 2% of total revenue.

An inside job: Currently uses an outside mechanic, but company is looking to hire its own part-time mechanic for equipment repair and maintenance work.

Parts inventory: "We used to stock a fair amount of parts but found that it was a waste. Now we only stock oil, grease, mowing blades, maybe one round of oil and air filters and anything that we must have on hand at all times. Replacement parts are purchased from our mechanic. We also try to stick with the same brand whether it's a blower or trimmer."

Cleaning/painting: "We have a hard time doing painting and cleaning because we don't have great access to water to wash equipment and trucks. Still, we try to
local suppliers. We buy multiples of a particular brand. For example, we buy the same brand for our walk-behinds, and so on. This is so we can stock a modest amount of inventory that will fit every piece in a particular equipment category."

Cleaning/painting: Cleaning is done in-house on a routine basis. Extensive cleaning, including steam cleaning engines and waxing, is done annually and sometimes bi-annually. Touch-up painting on trailers, mowers, pumps and sprayers is done in the winter months. Complete paint jobs are left to an outside paint specialist.

Equipment life: "Trucks and trailers are rotated between a 7- to 10-year period due to the wash trucks and equipment on a weekly basis. We do very little if any repainting of equipment."

Equipment life: "We're a little excessive when it comes to equipment — we don't want to go without. We'll try to allocate three spring trimmers to each of our two-men crews so they have a spare if one piece of equipment breaks down. Smaller pieces of equipment last between two and three years, while mowers can last as long as 10 years. We try to keep trucks as long as possible — the first truck I ever bought died in the fall of last year at 18 years old."

Equipment afterlife: "Once we're through with a piece of equipment, we'll often give it to charity. If we're still using that brand, we'll take the parts that are useful and keep them. If not, it'll go to the junkyard."

An inside job: Will be hiring a full-time shop person.

Parts inventory: Company stocks everything needed for routine maintenance: oil, air filters, blades, spark plugs, belts, nuts and bolts, and weedeater heads. "Whenever we use a part, we put it on our inventory list right away. Because of that, those parts are constantly replaced, and we don't get behind." They keep each piece of equipment within the same brand to make parts needs simpler.

Cleaning/painting: Cleaning is done weekly, and minor painting such as freshening up a deck is done as needed.

Equipment life: "We sell most of it to a local dealer and retain the best used equipment for our backups."

Equipment afterlife: "We sell most of it to a local dealer and retain the best used equipment for our backups."