



Zeros remain industry's workhorse

While the basic concept of the zero-turn mower hasn't changed much in decades, do yourself a favor, and check out differences among brands before writing that check.

BY RON HALL / Editor in Chief

Professional landscape maintainers have their choice of zero-turn radius mowers in just about every color of the rainbow, including a few colors that beg description. At last count, they can choose from more than 30 different brands offering well over 100 models. Not all brands are available everywhere, of course. Some manufacturers' products are strong in one region of the country, and others, in another. This is due to many factors, including differing terrains, grasses and cutting conditions, but mostly, the availability of local servicing dealers.

Is color the only difference among competing brands? Absolutely not. Each manufacturer boasts unique features in its units. These features can offer substantial benefits in terms of increased productivity, durability, and/or ease of

use/operator comfort depending upon a contractor's particular operations and the properties under his/her care. Other important considerations include serviceability (on-the-job and in-the-shop), parts availability and, in recent years, fuel consumption. In other words, while the majority of zero turns have much in common in terms of basic design and function, differences among competing brands are substantial enough to warrant a fair amount of investigation before making a purchase.

Take a test drive

Since commercial-quality equipment doesn't come cheap (In this case, you do get what you pay for), it's always a good idea to demo units or, better yet, allow your operators to demo them before writing that check. (See sidebar.) Beyond the large number of brands, property maintenance contractors are faced with many considerations when se-

lecting the best mowers for their operations, three of the more important being the size of mower (cutting width, engine selection, horsepower), style (front-mount, mid-mount, stand-on, articulating) and, in recent years, fuel source (gasoline, diesel, propane).

Zero growth

The proliferation of zero-mower choices within the past decade is testament to their popularity, not only with professionals but with homeowners, too. In 2000, shipments of mid-mount zeros totaled just over 60,000 units. By 2005 shipments had jumped to more than 150,000 units.

Much of this demand is coming from homeowners discovering the advantages of mowing with zero-turn units. They're purchasing zeros from "big box" stores and from traditional servicing dealers. Manufacturers are responding to and stoking this demand with effective marketing (often enlisting popular sports figures or celebrities as pitchmen), and with smaller, less expensive versions of their professional models. What they're selling to homeowners, in addition to saving time and ease of use, is mowing fun, judging by the smiles on the faces of the models (some-

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times attractive females) photographed atop these shiny, colorful units mowing green, weed-free turfgrass.

Still a favorite

While mid-mount sales have leveled the past several years, the zero-turn category, as a whole, remains the category of choice for most commercial mowing projects as it has been for the past generation. That's not to infer that zero turns are the do-all and be-all of professional mowing; they're not.

In spite of the industry's love affair with their ability maneuver around trees, beds and turn on a dime, increasing productivity considerably, contractors continue to need and buy other style professional-quality mowers, including a

variety of trim and walk-behind power mowers.

Advances in zero-turn mower technology have progressed a step at a time since John Reiger is reported to have built the first so-called zero turn in the spring of 1963 in his shop in Mount Ridge, KS. That unit, named the "Workhorse," had a 36-in. cutting deck. According to information on the Hustler Web site (www.hustlerturfequipment.com), Reiger produced 24 units, which he renamed "Hustler," borrowing the name of a B-58 fighter-bomber.

Eventually Reiger's machines attracted the attention of the partners of Excel Industries in nearby Hesston, KS, which began producing a 12-hp, 65-in. cut version of the Hustler, according to the Web

site. The introduction of hydrostatic drive in 1969 – this time the innovation of Ray Rilling, another persistent tinkerer – was another big step in the evolution of zero turns. From that day, manufacturers have been entering the market with their own variations, adding patented improvements, of that basic concept.

Today's zeros don't much resemble those first production models of 40 years ago, but by greatly increasing the efficiency on contract mowing, their impact on the professional landscape maintenance industry is almost incalculable. It makes you wonder who will come up with the next new equipment breakthrough that will have a similar impact on landscape maintenance. **LM**

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zero turn radius buying tips

1. Is it really a zero? Can it turn in its own length?
2. Will it hold enough fuel to satisfy your production needs?
3. Is the deck height adjustable in fine increments?
4. Are the controls operator-friendly?
5. How about seat comfort and adjustments?
6. Blade tip speed is a good indicator of "oomph"
7. Will the deck design allow you to mow in different grass conditions?
8. Gas, diesel or propane?
9. How about the unit's traction? Mowing sloped areas can be tricky, if not dangerous
10. Anti-scalp rollers are worth the added cost
11. Width is important. Compact zeros will pass through a 36-in. gate
12. How big is big enough for the properties you mow? Units over 70-in. mowers are tough to trailer
13. Can you get a full line of attachments?
14. What kind of service and parts support can you expect from your dealer?
15. Speed is cool, and we all like to go fast, but remember you can only mow as fast as conditions (safety, quality of cut) allow.

Put 'em through their paces first

The best way to evaluate power equipment of any sort, and especially a pricey item like a commercial zero turn radius riding mower that can cost \$10,000 or more, is to try it out — a demo in real-life conditions.

Some dealers host field days where you can operate their models, others bring units to local or regional educational events but almost all dealers will let you test out their units either at their facility or on your properties. Just ask. But since dealers generally offer a limited selection of brands, it's difficult to compare one manufacturer's product against another.

Mark Oct. 25-27 on your calendar and plan on being in Louisville, KY, those days for the Green Industry & Equipment Expo. You can operate dozens of different brands and models on the 20-acre outdoor demonstration area immediately adjacent to the indoor trade show at the

mammoth Kentucky Exposition Center. The Expo will run concurrently with educational conferences hosted by the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET) and the Professional Grounds Management Society. For more information about the Green Industry & Equipment Expo visit the Web site: www.gie-expo.com. — RH

