

# A ZERO-TURN FOR THE WORSE

The economy has made people cautious, but lower fuel prices and new technology give manufacturers hope for the zero-radius turn mower this year. BY DANIEL G. JACOBS MANAGING EDITOR

IT WOULDN'T BE a surprise if landscape contractors' children never learned (or at least were discouraged from singing) "Rain, rain go away; come again another day."

A sinking economy and rising fuel prices influence the way a lot of contractors run their businesses, but the single biggest factor might be the weather.

"You can give me a slow or poor economy and give me a lot of rain, and our industry is going to do all right," says Roy Dust, product specialist with Briggs & Stratton Yard Power Products Group - Commercial Division. "Give me the best economy you can, but if it's not raining, none of us are going to do squat."

The irony, of course, is that contractors can't control the weather; so they make decisions based on those other two factors. And when it comes to zero-radius turn mowers, there are several things to consider heading into 2009.

## The economy

"We're all bracing for a tough year," says Gilbert Peña, commercial segment strategy manager for John Deere. "Contractors, though, are optimistic the economic trend might not affect them. They have a strong feeling we can make it through this thing."

One way to do that is to hang on to a mower a little bit longer.

"The majority of the commercial customers tend to do a higher amount

of maintenance on their mowers, rather than replace them," Dust says. "It's become more important to look at cost of operation, return on investment and productivity. The fewer people they can do more with, the lower their overhead, the lower their personnel issues."

Briggs & Stratton, which owns the Ferris brand, hopes contractors will do that with the Evolution, a compact zero-radius turn mower introduced late last year.

"Contractors needed the faster ground speed that a stand-on or a

smaller zero-turn rider provides them than an intermediate walk-behind with a sully does," Dust explains. "It's premature to say we're going to revolutionize the market. It is as compact as a stand-on, yet it is a dedicated ride-on with a very ergonomically correct and comfortable position to be in."

Doing more, more efficiently is a universal mantra.

"It looks like manufacturers are trying to take costs out and find ways to produce them for less money and really put good technology in zero-turn mowers, but keep them inexpensive," says Tim Cromley, sales and marketing manager for Walker Manufacturing.

Walker's zero-turn mowers employ electronic fuel injection (EFI) systems.

"The payoff is a proven technology," Cromley says. "We've continued to develop electronic fuel injections as an improved method for clean air and fuel efficiency."



New zero-turn mowers are more efficient and compact than previous generation models.

→ Wright Stander ZK





↑ Toro's Z Master G3

→ FERRIS  
Propane Powered  
IS 3100ZP



→ Grasshopper  
FrontMount 735BT



Exmark Manufacturing, which introduced its Next Lazer Z at GIE+EXPO last year, also offers an EFI solution.

"We currently have EFI engines that meet the needs of some green-compliant definitions," says Dan Dorn, product sales manager. "It will be imperative that all contractors manage their money and their debt-to-asset ratio, and how they structure their business."

### Alternative fuels

When gasoline prices rise as they did last summer, many contractors begin

looking at alternatives. Propane still seems the most viable, but that might change over the next decade.

Hustler Turf Equipment recently introduced the first all electric zero-turn riding mower. The battery-driven Hustler Zeon holds a charge for up to 80 minutes.

"If you imagine our industry five years, 10 years from now, what kind of run times can we get from a 100% electric machine?" muses Adam Mullet, director of marketing for Hustler Turf Equipment. "That's what we see as the long, long-term goal."

Batteries are an emerging technology, but right now they're not quite capable of delivering a day's worth of cutting.

"It's in its infancy," Dust says of all-battery powered mower technology, "but I think with the incoming (Obama) administration, and with the trend that has been started, it's on a much more accelerated course than it was (last year)."

Still, there's no substitute for a little rain. **L.M.**



↓ Walker's MT31L mower with electronic fuel injection

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