

CLEAN CUT

Green Industry professionals are turning to propane equipment — and not looking back.

BY BRIAN RICHESSON



Jon Dozier was a tough sell the first time through the propane lawn equipment displays at the GIE+Expo in Louisville, KY.

“I don’t know if I wasn’t looking at it right, if I couldn’t make heads or tails of it, or if I didn’t think the savings were there,” the Georgia landscaper recalls of the propane lawn mowers he glanced over several years back at the trade show before going on his way.

To that point, Dozier’s only knowledge of propane was its role in cooking steaks on the grill. So how could he take the fuel seriously and rely on it to power his Merry Acres Landscape & Lawn Maintenance mowing equipment?

His attitude changed last year

during an opportunistic visit from a local propane marketer that turned Dozier’s business upside down. Russell Lemon, a representative from Modern Gas in Albany, GA, had been pitching Dozier on the benefits of propane lawn equipment. And on this particular visit to Dozier’s Albany office, the timing couldn’t have been better.

“It happened to be the right time that we were ready to buy equipment,” says Dozier, who last June replaced his gasoline fleet with eight Gravely 60-in. zero-turn riding mowers. On top of that, the company purchased a Ford F-150 propane pickup truck.

“You have to put yourself out there and make yourself available to these guys, and when they say ‘no,’ it’s not final,” Lemon says of the propane marketers’



Clockwise from top: Propane mowers are increasingly popular with maintenance contractors. Engines on propane mowers tend to require less frequent maintenance. Merry Acres Landscape & Lawn Maintenance co-owners Jarrett Martin, left, and Jon Dozier will burn 10,000 to 12,000 gallons of propane this year running eight Gravely mowers and a Ford F-150 pickup truck.

influence on landscapers. “You have to provide them with whatever they need.”

Landscape companies around the country have been making the same discoveries as Dozier and Merry Acres co-owner Jarrett Martin: Propane can power their equipment just as well as — or better than — gasoline.

Merry's time

Merry Acres runs its equipment year-round, with Dozier estimating the firm

will burn 10,000 to 12,000 gallons of propane annually. Modern Gas installed a 1,000-gal. fueling station at Merry Acres' facility, and the companies negotiated a 12-month price on propane. At less than \$2 a gallon, that supply contract enables Merry Acres to see significant fuel savings compared to the price of gasoline.

“We've always tried to be good stewards of the environment, but what got us looking into this area was a way to save money and increase our bottom line,” Dozier says. “It is an initial upfront expense to go propane. The trucks cost more, and the mowers cost more. But we're thinking we will recoup our cost in the first year-and-a-half.”

Initially, Dozier was hesitant about the propane lawn products, wondering whether they would hold the same power and performance as those running on gasoline. But the company

has been pleased with the results, even noticing an increase in power on the propane mowers.

“We put them in some nasty situations, cleaning up a restaurant that's been shut down for a while, and they blew right through that stuff,” Dozier says. “We never heard a strain on the mower, versus gasoline where the engine would bog down or slow up.”

Maintenance is also made easier on the propane mowers, as Merry Acres can double the amount of hours (now 100) between oil changes, “so our costs of maintaining it are down on our engine side,” Dozier says.

The company's Ford F-150 is used daily by its maintenance manager to check on accounts, but Dozier remains curious how fuel mileage would fare when a propane truck is worked harder, with a trailer and a heavy load of equipment.

In March, Merry Acres purchased four conversion kits from AltFuel LLC and has been testing other lawn equipment on propane. As the company needs more equipment, Dozier says it will continue to consider propane.

Staying competitive

No company has more experience using propane lawn equipment than Competitive Lawn Service in Downers Grove, Ill. It is said to be the first company in the country to operate its commercial crew — encompassing mowers, blowers, trimmers and trucks — entirely on propane.

Competitive Lawn Service runs a converted propane fleet of 18 mowers (12 Wright Standers and six Bob-Cat and Wright walk-behinds), 12 Dolmar blowers and six Lehr trimmers. The company also runs four propane-fueled Ford F-Series trucks with Roush retrofits, and a Ford dual-fuel truck from AJ Automotive Group.

“Every machine I have out there not running on propane is killing me,” says company founder Eric Hansen, who has put Competitive Lawn Service on



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the alternative fuel map with his push to propane, a process that began in 2008 when gasoline prices spiked. “I’d like to stop going to the gas station at all.”

With its converted equipment fleet, the company estimates it will burn about 25,000 gallons of propane this year, running mainly April through December. United Propane, a Heritage company, helped install a 1,000-gal. fueling station at Competitive Lawn Service for convenient, cost-efficient and secure fill-ups. About 40% of that propane goes into the company’s trucks.

“They’re like rocket ships; they’re extremely fast,” Hansen says of the trucks, which travel a small radius to customer sites, less than 10 miles from the office.

With a significant differential in per-gallon fuel costs between propane and gasoline, Competitive Lawn Service is saving about \$2,500 per month. And Hansen is seeing other benefits with propane. With slight adjustments, his first converted propane mower has reached 3,500 hours in runtime, when they normally “blow up at 2,500 hours,” he says.

“What we’re finding is these engines last longer. Do they last twice as long? We haven’t proven that yet, but they are lasting longer and we’re changing the oil every 100 hours as opposed to 25 hours,” Hansen says. “If we get an engine that

Baker Commercial Landscaping, Orlando, FL, converted 38 John Deere mowers to propane last year.

lasts longer, has less emissions, that runs the same, with the same cutting, that’s how we’re picking up all that savings.”

Hansen is a self-described “small-engine guy,” always looking for ways to gain longer runtimes and advantages from his equipment. Propane, he says, is helping him to achieve his goals — and allows Competitive Lawn Service to differentiate itself in the market.

Propane perspectives

When Baker Commercial Landscaping pulled one of its converted propane mowers, in operation for the previous five months, into the garage for an oil change, it made a notable discovery.

“When we drained the oil, it came out as clear as new. It was almost crystal clear,” says Bob Jensen, sales manager for the Orlando, FL-based company. “When we pulled the spark plugs, we found next to nothing on them. Maintenance-wise, this has been a huge benefit. It’s a clean-burning way to do business, and it saves us money and time.”

With help from Heritage Propane, Baker converted 38 of its John Deere mowers — 60- and 72-in. ride-ons and 48-in. walk-behinds — to propane last year.

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For Baker, no more time is wasted at the gas station, pulling the lawn equipment off the trailers for refueling. The price “at the pump” is also a welcome change, as the company saves about \$1.50 per gallon with propane compared to gasoline. Heritage refuels all of Baker’s cylinders on-site, with the company estimating that it burns more than 300 gallons of propane a week.

Moreover, propane provides a 6.5% better fuel burn than gasoline, and its clean-burning qualities reduce engine repairs by about 30%, while keeping many of its commercial customers satisfied during business hours, Baker President Marc Blum says. The company also notices a better response to the firing system with propane, as the walk-behinds are easier to start than the gasoline models.

“We have no regrets. We’re not going back [to gasoline]; we’re never going to consider it,” Jensen adds.

Shannon Wilson might not, either.

Competitive Lawn Service, Downers Grove, IL, converted 18 mowers including 12 Wright Standers, to propane.

He says he was “like a deer in headlights” when a representative from Metro Lift Propane, a division of Heritage, approached his landscape company, Greenscape Services in Sarasota, FL, about using propane in his equipment. That was about two years ago. The price of gasoline was a primary driver in the company adding four 61-in. zero-turn propane riding mowers to his 12-mower fleet.

“It’s ridiculous. It’s pushing almost four bucks a gallon,” Wilson says of gasoline prices. “It makes it really tough. You have to pass that on, but it doesn’t make the customers very happy, either. With propane, you can get a price locked in and it doesn’t fluctuate.”

Metro Lift supplies Greenscape’s propane through tank exchanges, with Wilson estimating a near 30% savings in fuel costs with the propane mowers. He says he hasn’t found any negatives with the units, noting the longevity of their clean-burning engines and fewer oil changes (once every eight months instead of three).

Wilson says he will continue to transition to propane mowers, with an



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Propane isn't just for mowers. This Lehr leaf blower is powered by a 1-pound refillable propane canister.



eye toward adding propane vehicles and his own refueling station as well.

Cleaning up

Billy Leavell is encouraging his colleagues to help clean the industry through propane partnerships. Nashville, TN-based Turf Managers LLC, which Leavell co-owns with Nathan Brandon, is running five of its 12 Exmark and Ferris 52- to 62-in. walk-behind lawn mowers on propane, servicing about 900 mostly residential customers 10 months out of the year.

The company first converted two mowers in 2008 in response to high gasoline prices, and has continually added propane to its new equipment in stages — with plans to convert them all to propane.

“We were and still are concentrating on environmentally friendly practices, and this is just a natural step for us to be more environmentally responsible, and at the same time it does have its economical advantages to us,” says Leavell, crediting the guidance and support of Jim Coker at Heritage Propane.

Turf Managers, which receives its propane supply in tank exchanges from Heritage's Metro Lift division, saves about \$1.05 per gallon with propane. The company is able to pay off the \$1,000 to \$1,200 per-mower conversion cost in about one year, Leavell says. But there are other benefits as well, particularly with the clean qualities of propane.

“You don't have to worry about filling up out of gasoline cans and the trash that gets in the gas tank and goes through the engine. The engines are much cleaner in that regard,” says Leavell, adding that the engines run and sound similar to gasoline.

“I didn't meet a gas can that didn't have a leaky nozzle; these cylinders attach just like a gas grill and you're good to go,” he says. **LMI**

Brian Richesson is senior editor of Landscape Management's sister publication LP Gas.

RESOURCES

According to the Propane Education & Research Council (PERC), there are 150,000 to 200,000 new commercial mowers sold each year, and the OEMs are making efforts to grow propane's share to 15% by 2015. That could translate to more than 150 million gallons of propane sales each year.

PERC's Marketer Technology Training Program educates propane marketers on opportunities in commercial mowing, among other applications. Visit www.propanecouncil.org/MTT.

Propane lawn equipment manufacturers include:

- › Bad Boy
- › Bob-Cat
- › Cub Cadet
- › Dixie Chopper
- › Exmark
- › Ferris
- › Gravely
- › Husqvarna
- › Lehr
- › Scag
- › Snapper Pro

Brian Feehan, vice president of engine fuel for PERC, says:

“Even though propane in commercial mowing was out there four years ago with two small OEMs [Enviogard and Dixie Chopper], and the adoption of larger OEMs points us in the right direction, this still needs to be viewed as an infant market — and it requires us to maintain our presence and get stronger in it.”