

Mowers can't break down, landscaper says

BY JASON STAHL / MANAGING EDITOR

Greg Kahl just can't deal with mower break-downs. As the owner of a small, family-run landscape company in Verona, WI that averages 250 to 260 stops a week, the breakdown of one mower is crippling. Some of the company's stops are two hours from the nearest dealer.

"We have two to three crews, with two to three people per crew and usually about two mowers per crew," Kahl says. "If one mower breaks down, the other has to do the rest of the work."

Since 1991, Kahl has made mowing the primary service of his business, and his current fleet consists of Ferris, Dixon, Bobcat and Cushman mowers. In 2001, however, he plans to switch to Ferris mowers, mostly because of a favorable test run he had with



Dependable mowers are a necessity in Greg and wife Jan Kahl's business.

the new IS 4000 Z with 72-in. deck and four-wheel independent suspension.

"I ran it for a week," Kahl says. "With the four-wheel suspension, you can keep the speed going. Plus, the cutting ability was very good. Without picking up any more employees, our family will be able to take on 20% more work."

Because Kahl's business is almost 100% mowing and most of his accounts are commercial, he has tested almost every kind of big mower on the market. His route alone runs 2,600 miles a week. His mowers must have quality, speed and dependability. Versatility is a bonus.

"I call my Ferris the 'billy goat' because it can go anywhere," Kahl says. "I see some really steep hills. On one job, all they used to do was hand-mow, but I can use my Ferris there."

He adds: "For quality, it's hard to beat walk-behinds. For me, though, I travel the road and do a lot of big jobs. Next year, I'm going to put a 72-, 61- and 52-in. mower on a trailer and I'll be able to do whatever I want."

BUYING THE BEST COMMERCIAL MOWER.

Investing in a new commercial mower for your business is an important step; and it's a decision that takes some thought. If you're thinking about a zero-turn rider, there are a number of features you should look for:

- The latest technology.** Today's most advanced zero-turns feature independent suspension (either 2 or 4-wheel) for increased comfort, speed, traction, stability and a more consistent cut.
- Rugged deck construction.** Choose a hand-welded deck with overlap-welded corners, a double top deck and reinforced side skirts to make sure it stands up to years of tough, commercial mowing abuse.
- Serviceability.** A simpler design means fewer parts and easier access to the engine compartment and hydraulics for routine maintenance and service. You should also look for 2-year warranties on parts and labor.
- Important features.** A low center of gravity; foot-operated deck lift; 360-degree pivoting, anti-scalp rollers; twin A-section hydro drive belts; and radius-cut, 1/4" thick hardened steel blades... they're all important to your comfort and productivity.

To make your choice of a new mower even easier, be sure to see the new 2001 line of Ferris mid-mount, zero-turn riders at www.ferrisindustries.com. Ferris is the innovation leader in commercial mower design. Don't make a decision to buy a new mower for your business without visiting your nearest Ferris dealer.

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Vitals

Company name: Kahl's Lawn Service

Location: Verona, WI

Founded: 1991

2000 gross revenues: \$250,000-\$300,000

Business mix: 80% commercial, 20% residential

Employees: 6

Services: Mowing, some landscaping

Property at a glance

Location: Post Crest Apartment Homes, Atlanta, GA

Staff: Post Landscape Operations

Category: Apartment complex

Total budget: \$88,560

Year site built: 1995-96

Acres of turf: 2

Acres of woody ornamentals: 7

Acres of display beds: 1

Total paved area: 20

Total man-hours/week: 65

Maintenance challenges

- ▶ Providing "top shelf," "organic-only" color program
- ▶ Hand pruning all ornamentals
- ▶ Maintaining one mile long shoreline for on-site lake

Project checklist

- ▶ On-site relocation of *Acer palmatum* "Seiryu"
- ▶ Re-staking of pine trees due to ice storm
- ▶ Landscape restoration due to CATV underground line installation

On the job

- ▶ 5 full-time staff, 2 seasonal employees, 2 licensed pesticide applicators

Post Crest

A 2000 Grand Award Winner of the Professional Grounds Management Society for Apartment Complex

What does an apartment complex administration do to maintain its 100% occupancy rating? Hold monthly grounds inspections, that's what. After all, a nice landscape is one way to keep tenants happy, right?

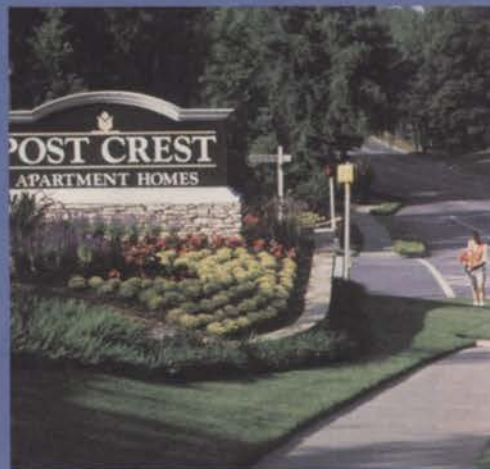
Post Crest Operations, the landscape branch of Post Apartment Homes, thinks so anyway. That's why crew members cut the 1.5 acres of "Meyer" zoysiagrass in straight diagonal lines, alternating the pattern each week to prevent the wheels on the mowers from wearing ruts into the turfgrass.

Every October, the 5,000 sq. ft. of annual beds are planted with pansies which provide constant color through winter. In November, spring flowering bulbs such as tulips and hyacinths are added.

Thanks to the landscape team, Post Crest residents are meeting the daily vegetable requirement in their diets. The complex's Urban Vegetable Garden allows residents to enjoy some of the same therapeutic gardening activities a homeowner might. Residents are provided

with vegetable seeds, plants and herbs by Operations, not to mention lessons in vegetable gardening. This provides for positive interaction between residents and landscape team members, who use the opportunity to promote organic fertilizers and pesticides.

A stick edger and mulching mower keep these narrow ribbons of "Meyer" zoysia neat and trim.



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MANAGEMENT

Editors' note: *Landscape Management* is the exclusive sponsor of the Green Star Professional Grounds Management Awards for outstanding management of residential, commercial and institutional landscapes. The 2001 winners will be named at the annual meeting of the Professional Grounds Management Society in November. For more information on the 2000 Awards, contact PGMS at 120 Cockeyville Road, Suite 104, Hunt Valley, MD; 410/584-9754. Web-site: www.pgms.org

A grounds crew member adjusts a sprinkler head in one of several annual displays seen throughout Post Crest.





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PRESIDENTIAL GREEN CHEMISTRY CHALLENGE WINNER

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HOW I SELECT MOWERS

Three veteran landscape contractors talk about the importance of reliability and productivity in equipment

BY VICKY POULSEN

A MANUFACTURER'S PERSPECTIVE

Making a better mower

Manufacturers talk about the key qualities they consider in their quest for the perfect mower design

When it comes to designing the perfect mower, no one knows more than the manufacturers themselves. They all put comfortable seating, increased productivity, ergonomics, operator safety and quality of cut on the list of things they strive to improve upon with each new design.

"We try to achieve a balance of speed and performance with our walk-behinds," says Jon Vyn, director

of equipment marketing, LESCO, Inc., Rocky River, OH. "However, if the operator is inclined to cut at a speed faster than the machine will tolerate, he'll end up with less than an acceptable cut."

To combat operator fatigue and boost productivity, manufacturers are offering several design features that are either standard or optional equipment on their mowers.

"We offer a stand-up platform and a sit-down sulky seat as an accessory option for our walk-behinds in an effort to reduce operator fatigue," says Ken Taylor, business unit manager for

LARGE CONTRACTOR

Name: John Dingus, Sr.
Title: District manager/landscape division
Company: Davey Tree Expert Co.
Location: Chantilly, VA
2000 revenues: \$315,000,000
Business mix: 70% residential,
 30% commercial
Employees: 135

When you take care of a cemetery, you don't expect a lot of complaints, at least not from the tenants. But there's one cemetery that's under the watchful eye of an entire nation, so slip ups there never go unnoticed.

One big job

"We have a lot of bosses, from members of Congress right up to the President," says John Dingus, Sr., district manager/landscape division of The Davey Tree Expert Co. in Chantilly, VA, which cares for Arlington Cemetery.

Arlington Cemetery is the "grand-daddy" of all maintenance contracts, a tedious job that often requires painstaking mowing and removal processes not typical of other maintenance projects.

"We get more complaints there because you're taking care of someone's final resting place," says Dingus. "We have to strive for perfection because no one wants to see their loved one's headstone all beaten up."

Dingus's crew, which consists of up to 135 workers during peak season, has to mow more than 100 acres a day rain or shine and each year remove 300 loads of leaves and lay about 60,000 yards of sod one grave at a time.

"The leaf removal process is more difficult than the mowing because you can't drive on the graves," says Dingus.

The maintenance itself is a Herculean feat when you consider the thousands of visitors who walk this hallowed ground each year.

In addition to maintenance, Dingus's operation offers everything from design and



Having to maneuver around graves is one of many challenges for John Dingus, Sr. and his crews.

chemical application to snow removal to some of the busiest, historical landmarks in Washington, D.C., including the FDR memorial and the White House. His equipment arsenal consists of several bucket trucks, zero-turn and front-line mowers for greater speed and maneuverability, walk-behinds, a giant vacuum, backhoes, mowing tractors and spring trimmers. His company also owns a

Commercial Lawn & Garden, Husqvarna, Charlotte, NC. "In addition, we offer a deluxe seat that has a lumbar adjustment and an optional foot-assist deck lift accessory which makes curb hopping, deck lifting and/or trailering the unit easier."

A premium full suspension seat with weight adjustment is standard equipment on many commercial mowers today, including those manufactured by New Holland in New Holland, PA. According to Bob Warfel, product marketing manager for New Holland, the company's products feature high, reclining seatbacks with fore and aft adjustment so operators of any size can position themselves comfortably in relation to the foot and hand controls. Flip-up padded armrests are included as standard equipment.

Mike Kadel, marketing manager for Dixon Industries, Inc., Coffeyville, KS, says suspension is a design feature that manufacturers are paying more attention to. "You want operators to stay alert and not be worn out at the end of an eight-hour-plus day," he says. "We focus on a very comfortable seat and suspension system that keeps the operator separate from the movements of the mower."

"Similar to the seating arrangement on big semi-trucks,

our newest product features a big rig suspension fully adjustable seat," he adds.

Full suspension seats with hydraulic dampening and adjustable tension controls are also a must for zero-turn mowers manufactured by the Country Clipper Division of Shivers Mfg. in Corydon, IA.

"Also important is our single-stick, 'point and go' control system which allows the operator to push faster in the direction he wants to go," says Carl Shivers, director of marketing for Country Clipper. "As opposed to twin-steer control, the learning curve for the single-stick is quite short."

With New Holland's four-wheel drive, the operator can choose to select full-time four-wheel drive if conditions demand it.

In most applications, according to Warfel, the operator will choose the automatic mode whereby the system will automatically engage four-wheel traction when it senses slippage, then return to two-wheel drive when traction is regained.

"This takes the guesswork out of the operation, allows

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school bus which hauls employees and a trailer full of spring trimmers to the job site.

Price not everything

Production is Dingus's number-one buying criteria, not price. "You don't want to have a yard full of equipment and have it just sit," says Dingus. "I want to get the most I can for my dollar."

Packaged equipment is a viable buy for contractors wanting equipment that can do multiple tasks. "For example, one commercial mowing manufacturer came out with a trencher equipped with different adapters so you can bore, and it comes already

rigged up on a trailer," says Dingus, whose company usually buys their mowing equipment outright through corporate and local suppliers. "The convenience of having everything you need on that one trailer and the ability to do several things at once is a big plus."

When it comes to equipment purchasing, loyalty is key. "We are loyal to those people who are loyal to us when we need service and parts," says Dingus. "If I have a machine that's breaking down time after time and it's not our fault, I want the manufacturer to stand behind that product and fix it."

With so much equipment, sticking to brand names is essential. "We do our own service and repair work, so we stick with brand names because we cannot afford to inventory 19,000 truck filters," says Dingus.

Safety, of course, is also a consideration. "Our safety department has to clear every piece of equipment and check it out thoroughly before we can buy it," says Dingus. "We also provide a lot of training to our employees before they begin using it in the field."

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for the greatest fuel efficiency and greatly reduces the chance of turf scuffing," says Warfel.

Easy-to-reach controls are also important factors in boosting productivity levels.

"The controls and the handling of controls is important for comfort and minimizing fatigue," says Bob Walker, president of Walker Mowers, Ft. Collins, CO. "The speed control on our zero-turn radius mowers works like a cruise control — our machine sets the forward travel with the operator so the operator has his hands off the control, allowing for more relaxed operation. It also allows people with various degrees of handicaps — where they have limited use of their hands and arms — to operate the machine."

With its walk-behinds, Exmark Manufacturing Co. in Beatrice, NE, has developed a unique control system.

"Unlike the pistol-grip system, innovative topside positioning of the controls with this system keeps the operator's hands further away from obstacles, creating a safety zone that helps to protect hands from injury," says John Cloutier, national marketing manager at Exmark.

Seating position is also a critical consideration when it comes to working on hills and general maneuvering.

"In general, a lot of zero-turn radius mowers can be turned quickly, and it's important for the operator to sit on a pivot point," says Walker. "If your ahead or behind pivot, you'll get jostled side to side."

Vyn says Lesco has modified its operator controls over the last couple of model years to allow for greater operating ease and better balance.

"Engines, drive trains, spindles and wheel castors have

all been upgraded for greater dependability," says Vyn.

Shivvers says other design features that make mowers more productive are built-in hydraulic oil coolers, larger tires, larger wheel stands and larger engine options including more fuel-efficient, fuel-injected engines.

The quality of cut is also a factor in determining a mower's efficiency.

"Our blades provide a 50% increase in the time between sharpening," says Rick Cuddihe, executive vice-president at Great Dane Power Equipment, Inc., a manufacturer of stand-on mowers in Jeffersonville, IN. "This benefit saves our customers time and money."

Noise is another factor that contractors need to consider when purchasing mowing equipment.

"Our commercial mowers feature smooth-running diesel engines with improved lower noise levels," says Warfel. "The engines are isolation-mounted and feature underhood exhaust for quiet, vibration-free operation."

"...while everyone wants to go faster, safety is foremost."
—Cuddihe

Name your price

Oftentimes, a good price doesn't equate to a good product.

"My formula for the best value for a customer is a machine that has the lowest possible cost of ownership and is highly-productive," says Walker. "Low cost isn't necessarily low price on the front end. Sometimes you can pay more and have your actual cost of ownership turn out to be less if it requires less maintenance and less repairs and has higher retail value in the end as a trade-in."

"The astute businessperson will look at real cost of ownership and all the costs that will go into the overall cost of a machine," adds Walker.

MEDIUM CONTRACTOR

Name: Larry Burklund
Title: General manager
Company: World of Green
Location: Lincoln, NE
2000 revenues: Undisclosed
Business mix: 98% commercial,
2% residential
Employees: 50

Like Dingus, Larry Burklund, general manager of World of Green in Lincoln, NE, believes that manufacturer integrity is important. "The true measure of a company is how their service department stands up to its equipment if we need something fixed," he says.

"We only use three suppliers but have had great luck and much success with them," he adds. "Excellent customer service and 24-hour service on equipment are important to us."

Almost all of Burklund's accounts are

commercial maintenance, requiring a dozen or so crews of three to four workers per crew and several chemical operators during his busiest season. In summer, his crews operate trimmers, five walk-behind mowers, 20 push mowers and several out-front mowers, some with bags attached.

"We do a lot of townhomes, which is difficult at times because each is unique and residents think of them as their own private homes," says Burklund.

As far as purchasing equipment goes, Burklund says his company buys equipment outright rather than leases, which is often left as a finance option when buying their trucks.

Although price is important, Burklund said it's not everything. "We look for durability, quality of cut, the speed of equipment, safety features and operator comfort," he says.

World of Green's record speaks for itself as far as safety is concerned. As of the end of November, Burklund says his company has gone 594 days without a loss-



Lots of luck and success has allowed Larry Burklund to deal with only three suppliers.

time incident. He says new employees endure four hours of safety training before they start work, another day of hands-on training as soon as they start and then are under direct supervision for the next couple of weeks after that. He also employs management safety and employee safety personnel who make sure all safety measures are continually being met.

"If you don't put your guys in dangerous situations in the first place, you don't have any problems," says Burklund.

According to Dick Kilgas of Kubota, manufacturer of riders equipped with either out-front or mid-mount deck designs, "products that are designed to be better, stronger and more versatile typically last longer. Therefore, the business can amortize over a longer time so they don't have to purchase equipment as often. This also adds to their bottom line."

W. Dick Tegtmeier, president and CEO of Encore, Beatrice, NE, which manufactures commercial riding mowers, says "in almost all cases, developing lower-end products to meet a lower cost is not synonymous with stronger, longer-lasting products."

"We, as manufacturers, are squeezed to a margin that is almost embarrassing," says Tegtmeier, who has been in the industry for more than 25 years. "A 36-in. walk-behind that cost \$350 then still costs that much today despite increases in labor, material costs and horsepower."

"If contractors want it to be stronger and last longer, it's going to cost more for the end users," adds Tegtmeier.

According to Bill Shea, vice president of sales at Ferris In-

dustries in Munnsville, PA, commercial cutters must understand there are services attached to the price of the product.

"A machine may cost more at a dealer, but how much time will the contractor lose if a part isn't available, which is typical when purchases are made at big box stores?" says Shea.

Peter Whurr, vice president of product management at Textron Golf and Turf Specialty Products in Racine, WI, says it's also important for contractors to understand that a lack of "creature comforts" doesn't equate to lack of quality.

"The real test of a product is the value it presents to the end user at the end of the day," says Whurr.

So is it a matter of what a contractor is willing to give up? Whurr explains. "If you look at ride-on mowers and the zero-turn radius mowers, can you forego an electric lift for a manual one, or one fuel-tank instead of two? It's all a matter of de-features," he says. "We will make a product, whether it's de-featured or higher-end, of the same quality and longevity."

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When someone suggests you spend more money on a less effective preemergent, it's time to hold on to your wallet.

