

Roland Taylor examines compact tractors and gives some advice on what to look out for when buying a new one

Small is beautiful

It is almost 25 years since the first compact tractor arrived here in the UK. Today, it is well established in the grass care and amenity market. This is a relatively far cry from what it was originally intended.



Japan is a small country and land is scarce, so farming is on a very small scale - what we here in the UK would call market gardening. The compact tractor was developed for this type of home-based agriculture, which it quickly saturated, so manufacturers had to seek export markets worldwide.

The first compacts arrived in the UK in 1974 and were introduced to replace the "Little Grey Fergie", but it was soon discovered that through lack of suitable attachments very few farmers were interested. These first tractors were powered by a twin-cylinder 12hp diesel engine and market gardeners and growers began to recognise its potential as a replacement for the Howard Gem Rotavator. Unfortunately, this industry was on the decline, mainly due to imports from Europe and sales were quickly coming to a standstill. The leading compact tractor distributors realised that an alternative market had to be found and they turned their attention to the grass cutting and maintenance sector. Today, this represents over 90% of the market.

For a golf course the compact was and is ideally suited. Lighter and smaller than its agricultural cousins, it has all the benefits of hydraulics and PTO. Soon whole ranges of attachments covering a host of turf-care applications were available.

Different role

Things never remain constant and new developments and ideas in turf management are introduced. Outside factors also play their part. The spate of new courses plus greater media coverage of USA championships led to an increasing demand for fairways that looked more like the centre court at Wimbledon. Large self-propelled machines began to appear on the market and replace the traditional gangmowers. The introduction of this type of mower has on many courses led to the compact tractor having a reduced role. However, there is still a lot of equipment that requires a tractor as a power source. Compact tractors range from 12.5 to 33 horsepower. There are larger models listed (40hp and 48hp) but it is debatable whether these can be classed as compacts. As far as basics are concerned, there is a choice of either mechanical gearbox or hydraulic drives. Diesel power is the norm and full hydraulics, powered steering and four-wheel drive are standard. As with all products, each manufacturer offers refinements and extra benefits. Before any decision to buy is made these need to be assessed to determine what advantage they will give to your specific requirements.

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Think long and hard

A compact is a long-term investment, so it is important to take a long hard look at exactly what you require as a specification. As well as addressing immediate requirements, a projection over at least the next five years has to be considered.

Will the horsepower level of today be sufficient to drive future machinery? What type of transmission? A hydrostatic drive may be all right now, but in a few years time will you have attachments that require crawler gears. It is not easy to determine what is going to be needed over the next half-decade, but a calculated assessment of future requirements could save extra expense and frustration because there is insufficient power available. It is a bit like computers. One that has the capacity power today is below par tomorrow.



Spread the load

Buying a compact is a capital expense, and, as such, can be written down over a period of time. On this basis it should be included as part of a planned replacement programme spread over a number of years. This will also help to keep abreast of both with compact tractor developments and the attachments they drive.

One big benefit the compact tractor has introduced to grass maintenance is the financial packages. These are designed to make buying as painless as possible. From the experience gained in the agricultural industry, companies have come up with a choice of schemes that spread the load. Cashflow is the life blood of any business and a golf club is no different. If a method of payment that reduces the pressure on available cash is available it needs to be given consideration. Working with manufacturers, finance houses have



been able to provide the funding needs of golf clubs. There are a number of alternatives to buying outright. These may include either 0% or low interest hire purchase schemes or low cost leasing. Other plans include a programme that allows for a number of annual payments of capital to be made plus low interest monthly payments spread between. Often there is a choice of contract ends. These could be disposal, trade-in, final payment or refinancing.

Having formulated your budget plan then is the time to call in an expert to demonstrate which method of payment is going to give you the most benefit. It is also recommended that professional advice be sought on how the availability and timing of tax relief will impact on the cost of the investment. The market is highly competitive, so it is worth shopping around to find the best finance option that will match your specific requirements and financial planning.

A compact tractor is still very much the main source of power for an extensive range of operations and this is likely to continue. How else would you operate a front loader for moving top dressing or drive a vertidrain? For many courses it is still the most cost-effective way of mowing their fairways.

From the point of view of choice it is very much a buyer's market with companies who previously only sold grass-cutting machinery now offering a range of compacts. For this reason alone when considering a new one of these little workhorses, it is worth taking time out to access what is on the market. Then consider exactly what your requirements will be for at least the next five years. Armed with all this information find the most cost effective finance package. You are very much in the driving seat.