

Time for a Trim

James de Havilland measures his angles and investigates the best ways to trim tricky banks and hills.

Anyone who has spent a substantial amount of time operating a brush cutter to mow a bank will no doubt agree that these machines can be tiring to use. Combine a hot day, safety kit and a large heavy-duty model, and the word tiring upgrades to exhausting. So what are the alternatives?



The latest Kawasaki brushcutter. There is nothing 'wrong' with this type of equipment but this cannot hide the fact that even the best units are tiring to use for extended periods, particularly when working on a slope. So what are the alternatives?

On any golf course, there will be areas that are difficult to access with ride-on equipment yet still need to be kept trimmed. Typical examples will be around trees and shrubs and on banks. When it comes to controlling growth on the latter, the most typical solution is to carry out a periodic cut with a hand held brush cutter; either with a blade or nylon line cutting head.

Using a brushcutter to keep a modest area under control is no problem. Combine a steep slope and heavy growth in need of a full day's work and the job may still be manageable. When this job needs repeating perhaps three or more times a year, or when there are several long days of work in hand, it may be time to think of an alternative.

One item of bank mowing kit that is worth looking at is a pedestrian power scythe. Widely used on the continent, this type of mower was largely displaced by large pedestrian rotaries in the UK for long grass mowing, the latter having the advantage of arguably greater tolerance to debris and rough ground. On banks, however, a large rotary mower can be something of a handful.

The cutter bar of a power scythe, in contrast, is relatively light. The design also lends itself to working on a bank as the width of the cutting unit adds stability. Of equal importance, the 'pedestrian tractor' element of modern designs are far better balanced and easy to operate than some older generation machines. The much loved, but often cursed, Allen power scythe comes to mind as an example.



◀ Although a machine like the Etesia Atilla AV 95 ride-on brush cutter is not designed to work on really steep ground, it can work safely on a slope of up to 30 degrees. This 18hp machine retails for a shade over £6,300 plus VAT, with hire rates of around £100 a day or £400 a week.



▲ A flail mower attachment on the front of a two-wheel tractor will deal with heavier growth, but will not be as effective as a cutter bar in long grass. A 0.60m flail for a Tracmaster unit sells for £880 plus VAT



▲ The Toro Z500D ride-on mower has a 27hp Briggs & Stratton Daihatsu Diesel engine with a cutting width of 60"



▲ Hover mowers are by no means new, but they are now starting to find a new generation of users. Lloyds of Letchworth offers models it claims are particularly good at coping with longer grass thanks to a deeper deck design. The latest models are offered with extra long handles to make it easier to mow down slopes such as bunker sides. Prices around £450 plus VAT.

Broadly speaking, there are two types of power scythe to consider; dedicated bank units that have a power unit able to work on steep sidling ground and two-wheel tractors to which a cutter bar can be fitted. The ability of the latter to work on a slope will be determined by the angle at which the power unit can operate before becoming starved of lubricating oil.

For most golf courses, a two-wheel tractor and cutter bar combination will have obvious appeal, the power unit having the ability to drive other equipment that can include a cultivator or rotary brush. Cutter bars do have limitations. Ideally suited to longer grass and upright vegetation, cutter bars are less than ideal when it comes to dealing with matted material, uneven ground and heavier vegetation.

An alternative could be a flail mower attachment for the same power unit. Pro-rata, a flail will take more power to drive than a cutter bar, so its working width may be modest, but it could prove viable to consider both on certain courses.

Pedestrian rotary mowers should not be dismissed for bank work, assuming their power units can operate at the desired angles. It is of course possible to attach a rotary to the front end of a two-wheel tractor. This route may work well where the banks to be mown are firstly not overly steep and secondly limited in height. A heavy mower on the front of any pedestrian machine will always want to head down hill, making their extended operation on a tall and steep slope tiring or possibly hazardous.

A possible rotary alternative is a rotary hover mower. Light, relatively inexpensive and simple, hover mowers were once considered the ideal way to mow a bank; tied to the end of a length of rope, these units were commonly lowered down long steep slopes to cut them. Modern operator control systems, and possible risk assessment issues, may rule this out now, but where a hover mower can be used it could well be a faster alternative to a brushcutter.

There is then the choice of a ride-on brush cutter. There are an ever increasing number of these units on the market, and it is tempting to assume that because of this they are a familiar tool. For those that have not seen one, imagine a ride-on domestic rotary mower with much stronger build, typically hydrostatic drive and a mid-mount rotary brushcutter of up to 0.95m cutting width. Power will come from a petrol engine of at least 12hp plus.



▲ Remote controlled mowing comes of age with the Ransomes Spider. Designed to operate on slopes of up to 40 degrees, the machine has a light footprint as it has no operator and related controls. Remote technology at present is costly, but this type of equipment may become more affordable if the concept takes off.

The deck of these machines is designed to tackle heavy material, hence the term brushcutter, but they will also cope with grass. Of equal importance, they have a low centre of gravity that enables them to work safely across slopes of up to about 30 degrees. Some courses could well justify one of these units for brush control, but they are not designed as a specific bank mower.

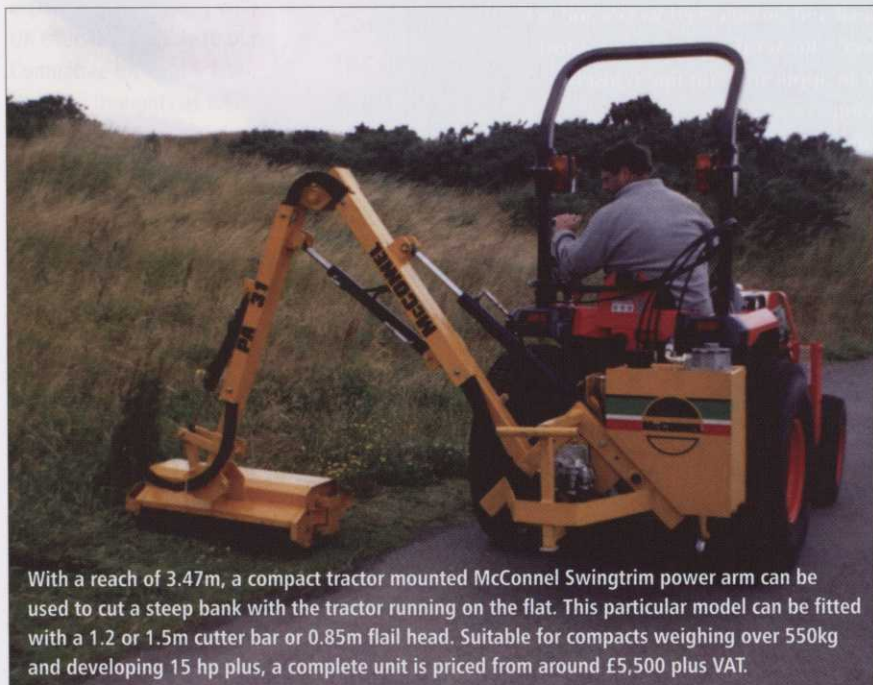
What is purposely designed for this particular job is the Ransomes Spider radio controlled slope mower. Designed to operate on terrain as steep as 40 degrees, the 180kg unit has a 0.8m cutting width and is powered by a 494cc Kawasaki four-stroke V-twin petrol engine pumping out 18hp.

Each of the four steerable wheels is hydrostatically driven, the operator being able to control the machine from up to 50m away. The downside is that the Spider has a £15,500 sticker price. That is a lot of money for what is essentially a small rotary mower, but it is still considerably less expensive than a nasty accident. If your course is blessed with steep banks that need keeping in trim, this machine could well be an answer.

DO YOU HAVE TO MOW YOUR BANKS?

It is a hard enough job to keep roughs, fairways, tees, greens and other areas of turf looking good without the added consideration of looking after hard to access areas. For some clubs, the simple answer is to let these parts of the course look after themselves. With thoughtful use of shrubs, trees and varieties of slow growing grass, a difficult to mow bank can be transformed into a feature.

It is worth remembering that a golf course can be a sterile environment for beneficial wildlife. A sympathetically managed area of un-mown grass, perhaps planted with shrubs, has to be better than a problem bank of difficult to mow grass; assuming that this change of use does not interfere with play. So before getting out the new machinery leaflets, why not think through an alternative way of dealing with the area.



With a reach of 3.47m, a compact tractor mounted McConnel Swingtrim power arm can be used to cut a steep bank with the tractor running on the flat. This particular model can be fitted with a 1.2 or 1.5m cutter bar or 0.85m flail head. Suitable for compacts weighing over 550kg and developing 15 hp plus, a complete unit is priced from around £5,500 plus VAT.