

When You Just Can't Reach

James de Havilland looks up and assess the best tools to use when cutting branches and trimming hedges from ground level.

Back in the 1960's, a children's television programme featured a character by the name of Twizzle. Able to extend his arms and legs to reach tall and obscure places without the aid of a ladder, a real life Twizzle would no doubt find a lot of work cutting tall hedges and lopping branches from trees. Fortunately, there are tools that can tackle this type of work with its non-fictional operator remaining firmly on terra firma.

Pole saws and hedge trimmer blades on the end of extension poles can make lopping small branches and cutting tall hedges much easier. There are a range of different makes and models available, but it does pay to do a bit of research beforehand, particularly when it comes to the use of pole saws.



POLE SAWS OR POWER PRUNERS

Chainsaw accidents can typically be traced back to poor operator training and not paying full attention to the job in hand. No modern saw is in itself dangerous and when used on a golf course, with the appropriate protective clothing, risks are minimised. Removing branches from a tree, however, is a different matter.

Height, ropes, chainsaws, ladders and even front loader buckets were once called in for 'DIY' tree surgery. Combining height and saws used to provide the ideal ingredients for a trip to casualty or worse. Thankfully, modern risk assessment rules these practices out. Some courses will also have trained chainsaw operators who know how to lop branches at height safely. But what about those circumstances where an overhanging branch needs tackling and there is no one on site with the training to deal with it?

It is here where a pole saw or power pruner can be useful. Used with care, these tools can remove a substantial branch without damaging the tree and, more importantly, with far less risk to the operator than using a chainsaw.

Most chainsaw and brushcutter manufacturers produce what is essentially a brushcutter power unit and pole with a chainsaw head in place of a blade or line trimmer. Indeed a number of manufactures can supply multipurpose units with hedge trimmer, brushcutter, chainsaw and other attachments.

The two main types of dedicated pole saw on offer are fixed length units with a reach to the tip of the saw to just under 3.0m or telescopic units that may extend to perhaps 4.5 to 5.0m.

The saw element, incidentally, will typically comprise a bar of 10, 12 or possibly 14". Professional backpack engine units, with a hydraulically powered saw, are also offered. These go up to 6.0m, but are not cheap at around £950 plus.

Telescopic pole saws are likely to be more versatile but also more expensive. A high quality rigid pole saw will be priced from £400, telescopic units carrying a premium of at least £50 to £100. Reach, incidentally, should not be confused with actual cutting height. For safety, the pruner needs to be operated at 60 degrees to the branch. This is to allow the latter to fall and not land on the operator.

Pole saw two-stroke engines tend to span 20 to 30cc and 0.6 to 1.5kW output. In most cases, a body harness is supplied to help support the weight of the tool when moving it around, but a support harness may also be supplied for use in work, more of which later. In terms of how they

Powered by a 23.6cc two-stroke engine, the 6.2kg Echo PPT2400 power pruner, from Countax, has a telescopic shaft that will reach from 2.74m to 3.83m. The 12" cutting unit can reach up a further 1.59m fitted with an additional extension. Price £399 plus VAT



Using a power pruner to lop a branch is both safer and easier than using a chainsaw. It would be better to cut a large branch, as pictured, in shorter sections, leaving a long stump to be cut correctly by someone who knows what they are doing.

▲ When fully extended, a power pruner can access branches that would otherwise be difficult to reach. Light trimming is easy with this type of tool and helps keep tree branch growth under control economically.

work, think of a brushcutter, with a right angle gearbox transmitting drive to the saw.

Shaft strength on telescopic pole pruners is a point to consider. Some use flexible steel shafts, others, like STIHL, using a lightweight alloy. The way the shaft slides is similar to a PTO shaft; the difference is that the outer sections are strong enough to support the weight of the cutting head. To prevent the driveshaft fouling the tube, movable bearings support it as the tube is extended.

It takes practice to use these tools, and knowing where to start a cut is every bit as important as being able to use the machine to avoid getting tired. A key is using the harness as much as possible; it is possible to work without one, but the operator will soon get arm and back ache.

The basic shoulder strap that typically comes as standard is only really aimed at providing limited support. This is fine for occasional use, but it will not be as effective as the more complete harness designs that can be supplied by some manufactures as an option. These bear the weight of the engine and allow the operator to pivot the saw from the attachment point and onto the branch. A big advantage of this system is that it spreads the weight of the pruner across both shoulders. When dealing with higher branches, however, the saw will still need to be raised out of the support to provide the necessary reach.

Working a pole saw is straightforward for thin, lighter branches. These can be cut in one action from the top down. Thicker and heavier branches need cutting with care. It is best to cut back towards the trunk progressively in sections to reduce both the weight and volume of material falling. This will help protect the tree and prevent a long branch swinging back and clouting the operator.

£95 plus VAT circular saw for larger branches



For a clean cut at the trunk, larger braches should be undercut by a third before sawing through from the top. The aim is to produce a clean cut that allows the 'wound' to heal quickly and prevent disease entering the tree. As a guide, keep the cut close to the trunk but retaining enough branch bark at its base to grow over and heal the 'wound'. In practice, getting a clean cut from a pole saw is not easy simply because the saw element is a long way from the operator.

Capacity wise, most pole pruners will tackle a 40cm diameter branch if the saw chain is sharp. Tackling a branch of this size is not necessarily recommended, but it does show engine power is not the key issue but a good sharp chain is the key. As a rule, it is always better to prune lightly and leave a cleanly cut truncated large branch. In most cases it is best to leave cutting branches right back to the trunk to a trained arboriculturist, particularly on specimen trees.

EXTENDED HEDGE TRIMMERS

Although it is stating the obvious, the two key elements to a good hedge trimmer are the power unit and the blade. But a vital aspect that turns an effective tool into one that is easy to use and not over tiring is good ergonomics. This assumes added importance when it comes to using an extended unit; a heavy, poorly designed trimmer will soon fatigue the operator.

It is tempting to simply list a range of extended trimmers on offer, but the key to choosing a machine is to look to its potential versatility. The ability to adjust the cutting head to a different angle enables one unit to be used to cut the sides' top and possibly the upper reaches of the offside of a hedge with one unit worked from the same positions.

Dedicated extended reach hedge trimmers will come with a choice of double or single sided blades and cutting widths of up to about 0.60m or 24 inches. The length of these trimmers will vary, but as a guide 150 to 250cm is typical, with retail prices ranging from £400 to £500 for a dedicated unit. A longer blade will weigh more and may not be more productive.

MULTI-PURPOSE UNITS

Arguably the best option to look for is a unit that has interchangeable tools; these can include a saw, trimmer, brush and light cultivator, the latter possibly being an ideal tool for fluffing up a bunker. Such units are priced from around £400 and make a versatile choice for a golf club.



£110 plus VAT rotary blade trimmer that can cope with a less formal hedge.



Echo HCA 2400 hedge trimmers, at £399 plus VAT, can be fitted with attachments that include a 0.45m multi-position double bladed hedge trimmer. This is ideal for use of well maintained hedges; the same power unit also accommodating...