



BY JAMES E. GUYETTE

More superintendents are less concerned about mowing hard-to-reach turf around ponds and bunkers thanks to the cool technology that has their mowers floating on air. Those using hovering mowers report that the performance level of the machines has improved dramatically the past few years.

The current devices are lighter, tougher and less prone to breakdowns, users say. With the number of hills, dales and bunkers gracing today's courses, a hovering mower in a maintenance facility is a relief for those who cut turf in steep places.

"They're lightweight and maneuverable," reports Jack Holt, a maintenance worker at Pebble Beach Golf Links in Pebble Beach, Calif.

While a hovering mower is not meant for bentgrass greens and other turf requiring high-precision mowing, it does a good job on fairways and rough.

"There's going to be some areas that a riding machine can't mow, and that's where you use them," says Lee McLemore, superintendent at The Country Club of Birmingham in Alabama.

The Country Club staff uses Flymo hovering mowers on deep-banked bunkers and sheer pond shorelines. A hovering mower is more efficient than a typical single-shafted weed trimmer to tackle this type of tough terrain, McLemore says. "It's like having a string trimmer that floats, except you get a better cut," he adds.

The string trimmer-like cutting technology of a Flymo makes it safer than a bladed mower, McLemore says. (The Flymo and Husqvarna brands utilize a triangular-shaped, monofilament line.) Workers should wear standard eye protection, although the mower doesn't scatter much debris, he notes. But he advises users to wear shoes with ankle support

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Hangin' In There

Today's hovering mowers are lighter,
tougher, and more popular than ever

BOB LYNCH

Hover Mowers

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because they're working on slopes.

McLemore oversees two courses, and his department purchases six to eight hovering mowers each year. "We get a year (of performance) out of a mower at the most," he says. "It's not a high-capital item."

At the Golf Course of Lawsonia in Green Lake, Wis., superintendent Mike Berwick says his crew uses Eastman Industry's Hover Mower on "anything we can't get a riding mower on and anything we can't put a four-cycle engine on because of the angle."

The Hover Mower's adjustable-height cutting feature was attractive to Berwick, who recalls tales told by colleagues of the challenges of mowing slopes.

"I've heard all kinds of crazy stories," he says, such as those involving four-wheel drive vehicles towing attached mowers and workers who tied ropes on mower handles to get a longer reach. "We have elevated greens, including one that's 25 feet high," Berwick says, adding that the greens can be easily reached and cut with a Hover Mower.

The Husqvarna Hovering Trimmer used at Oak Hill GC in Milford, N.J., does a better job on bunker banks than a weed trimmer, says superintendent Jim Martin. "We use it mainly on steep bunker faces," he says.

Martin admits, however, that some of his workers prefer weed trimmers because they're less cumbersome.

Name game

The Flymo, Hover Mower and Hovering Trimmer are different makes of hovering mowers, but sometimes even their own users have a difficult time telling the brands apart. Call it the Band-Aid syndrome.

Andy Masciarella, president of Precision Small Engine Co., U.S. manufacturer of the Flymo, says his hovering mower brand suffers from the syndrome. People call Precision with diagnostic questions or requests for Flymo parts, but sometimes they actually own competing brands or a make that's no longer manufactured.

There are other reasons for brand confusion, including:

- Precision is the exclusive manufacturer and distributor of Flymo mowers in the United States, but the Husqvarna Hovering Trimmer

is made by Flymo in England as a private-label product.

- Flymo and Husqvarna hovering mowers have the same design. Did we mention that Precision is also a Husqvarna distributor? "It gets kind of complicated," Masciarella admits.

- Eastman Industries of Portland, Maine, makes the Eastman Hover Mower. In 1997,

IF YOU'RE PONDERING A HOVERING MOWER PURCHASE, MAKE SURE THE MANUFACTURER IS GOING TO BE AROUND LONG ENOUGH TO ENSURE THAT SERVICE AND REPLACEMENTS ARE AVAILABLE.

Eastman purchased Grasscraft, which also made a hovering mower. Eastman stopped manufacturing Grasscraft hovering mowers in 1998 and sold out its inventory by 1999. But the company still stocks parts for it.

- Another company in Florida, which didn't return a phone call, also makes a hovering mower with "hover mower" in its name.

In demand

Manufacturers of hovering mowers say their use is widespread among golf courses. Chuck Hanners, Eastman's national sales manager, guesses that up to 95 percent of U.S. courses carry hovering mowers, and there are about 40,000 in use.

Masciarella is more conservative, saying that 75 percent of golf course maintenance staffs have a hover mower. "Ninety-nine percent of what we sell is to the golf course industry," he adds.

It's not uncommon for a golf course to have 25 to 30 machines, according to Masciarella, who claims most courses have five or six hovering mowers.

But superintendents pondering a hovering mower purchase should make sure the manufacturer is going to be around long enough to ensure that service and replacement parts are available. "There have been companies selling hovering mowers that have come and gone," Masciarella says. ■

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