

Sales of tractors under 40 horsepower shine in an otherwise cloudy market, making landscapers and sundown farmers attractive to dealers and manufacturers.

The Bright Spot Of the Tractor World

by Ron Hall, assistant editor

Good news in the tractor industry, particularly for consumers, is the new generation mid-sized tractor which is finally gaining the recognition it deserves.

It may be one of the best equipment bargains on the market.

In spite of its compact size, this muscular rugged brute can bite off big jobs in all phases of the Green Industry. The availability of long lasting diesel engines, 4-wheel drive and other features such as power steering previously found only on larger agricultural tractors make this a different tractor than the small workhorse of dad's day.

"What we like to emphasize in this size tractor is the value of the product in terms of its purchase price," Tom O'Connor of Bolens says. "These tractors are very well built, their life expectancy is extremely long, and the customer is recognizing that they're a better value for his dollar."

Sales figures support O'Connor.

While sales of its bigger agricultural cousins have yet to climb out of the doldrums, sales of compact and mid-sized tractors have been on the rise. Moving 41,967 units in 1982, under-40

hp tractor sales increased to 45,595 in 1983 and to 47,689 through November of 1984. Sales of these smaller tractors now account for about 40 percent of all tractors sold, according to figures compiled by the Farm and Industrial Equipment Institute.

Manufacturers now provide tractors in an almost unbelievable variety of hp, filling what consumers formerly thought of as a "tractor gap". Much of this activity has been in response to the coming of age of the so-called "sundown farmers", professionals with four or five acres in suburbia and time to putter with them. Or as Bill Templeton, vice president sales of Kubota, notes: "Manufacturers didn't listen very well to their dealers. Now they are."

Super machines?

Larger than a lawn or garden tractor, the utility tractor offers automotive-type features for comfort and is a time saver for a bewildering number of grounds maintenance and landscaping tasks. The base price of these mid-sized tractors starts at about \$5,500 (not much more than a hefty garden

tractor with gingerbread) and goes up depending on the horsepower and model. A tiller may cost \$1,500, a rear-mount mower \$1,500, and a front loader another \$2,000.

"These small ag-type tractors are just the thing if a guy wants a workhorse. They ain't no tinker toys," says Mike Young, parks and maintenance supervisor for Toledo, OH. "They can be the backbone of your operation."

Their versatility lies in the number of jobs they perform. That means attachments, many of which can be made operational in just minutes thanks to the universal Category One 3-point hitch. That's what separates them from the smaller garden tractor. The just as easily engaged spline-shafted Power Take Off (PTO) units—several manufacturers are now even offering mid-tractor PTO—allow the use of attachments from independent equipment manufacturers.

Tractor manufacturers and independent equipment concerns offer a full line of accessories for mowing (belly mounts, flail, gang reel, rear rotaries), plows, cultivators, disk harrows, and rotary tillers. Add front loaders, backhoes, posthole diggers, trenchers, wood chippers, log splitters, snow blowers, and snow blades, and you've got a working machine. Manufacturers continue to fine tune their offerings.

But if versatility is the utility tractor's number one attraction, performance is its bread and butter. "Customers are looking for the three 'P's' when it comes to equipment," a veteran lawn and garden equipment rep notes. "First comes performance, then parts and service, and then price. If the performance is there, and you can back him with parts and service, he won't mind spending a little more. Price isn't a customer's first consideration. It's downtime. He hates to pay for that downtime."

Performance is what Young was



looking for when the City of Toledo, plagued with high operating and maintenance costs, replaced much of its equipment with a two-pronged program (smaller hydraulic reel mowers and a fleet of small 4-wheel-drive diesel tractors) about three years ago.

"We wanted to downsize as much as we could," Young explains. "By going with the 4-wheel drive Kubota's we could downsize our equipment."

Kubota is the leading marketer of compact diesel tractors in the U.S., third in tractor sales of all sizes. When the first Japanese-built tractors made their appearance in the U.S. the seats were too small for American fannies, the pedals too small for American feet. But, the foreign manufacturers ironed out the bugs, and American manufacturers beefed up their lines with their own foreign-built products. Almost all utility tractors under 40 hp are now produced overseas, and users claim they are, regardless of company, comparably rugged in spite of differences in sales features.

"Everybody has a model that has certain standout features," Bolens' O'Connor says. "The customer just has to pick out the features he wants. The tractors themselves are comparable."

Ford offers full-time live hydraulics as a standard feature on its 1000 Series tractor, while John Deere offers a turbocharged mid-sized tractor, the 1050, and Yanmar can brag up its clutchless shuttle power shift. Other manufacturers offer tractors with their exclusive features.

Several dealers report 4-wheel-drive units are becoming more popular, and while 4-wheel drive may not be for everybody—particularly if mowing lawns is the vehicle's main use—it's almost a must for snow removal. It has been estimated that 4-wheel drive gives a tractor 35 percent more pulling power which might be a bargain considering it adds only about seven percent to its cost.

The City of Toledo's Young is part of the growing diesel trend also.

"Two things scare people about diesel—maintenance and costs," Young says. "They think they'll have to have a diesel mechanic, and diesels cost more initially, about \$800 to \$1000 more per engine. But within 2½ years we've paid for the engine in fuel savings alone. As far as mechanical work, I can't afford a lot of wrenching, but we figure we're going to get 3,000 to 5,000 hours before we have to go through these engines."

In addition to the Kubotas, Young's crew also uses an International Harvester 284 and an Allis Chalmers 5020, and he's just as enthusiastic about them. "Across the board I think

all of these small tractors are very reliable," he says.

Dennis Hunter, grounds superintendent at Milton Hershey School, Hershey, PA, is eyeing replacements for his aging five-tractor fleet. "I'm leaning more and more to diesel because of economy and maintenance, and I'm thinking about going to even smaller equipment," he says. "I'm getting positive feedback from the people I talk to. I keep in touch with some of the golf course superintendents in this area and they're all happy with these small tractors."

Hunter gets a lot of use from the International Harvesters in his present fleet. Several are equipped with front loaders, one used primarily for pulling an 11-gang reel mower, another for final grading and, equipped with a York rake, for lawn work. He also uses tractors for snow removal and one, equipped with turf tires, for aerating, vericutting, and the fertilization of athletic fields.

Dealers, however, caution downsizing should begin with an accurate appraisal of long range costs, particularly in future labor and tractor maintenance costs. A short-term savings could turn out to be a long-term waste. For instance, a 35 PTO hp vehicle with a Woods RM90 rear-mount mower cuts a 7½ ft.-swath and can handle about 4½ acres per hour. A smaller hp tractor with a 5-foot belly mount takes a much longer time to mow the same amount of acreage. That, of course, means more wear and tear on the smaller tractor, more fuel, and more manhours behind the wheel.

In Fort Myers, FL, Jack Klipfel, maintenance supervisor at The Landings LTD, reports he uses a Ford 445 with a bucket loader for scraping and general golf course work, while a more muscular Ford 2600 runs a Bush Hog. "We mostly stick with Fords," Klipfel says. "We're real happy with them. We've just had to repair or replace odds and ends. We haven't had to completely rebuild an engine yet."

The sales success of small tractors is the impetus for even more daring offerings, like Jacobsen's new 24-hp diesel-powered G-4X4. Shown to Jacobsen distributors this fall, the G-4X4 features an unusually low center of gravity (the operator sits down in the machine automotive style) and four-wheel steering. With its oversize low-pressure tires, the G-4X4 is targeted for the turf market, but its versatility is being touted. In addition to cutting grass with front-mounted rotary or flail mowers, the G-4X4 can operate a rotary broom and snowthrower as well as a rear-attached spreader. A dozer blade for plowing snow or mov-

Allis-Chalmers
Box 512,
Milwaukee, WI 53201

Ariens Co.
655 W. Ryan St.
Brillion, WI 54110

Bolens Corporation
215 South Park St.
P.O. Box 249
Port Washington, WI 53074

Ford Tractor Operations
2500 Maple Road
Troy, MI 48084

Gravely International, Inc.
One Gravely Lane
Clemmons, NC 27012

International Harvester
8430 West Bryn Mawr Ave.
Chicago, IL 60631

J.I. Case, Outdoor Power
Equipment Division
119 S. First St.
Winneconne, WI 54986

Jacobsen/Division Textron
1721 Packard Ave.
Racine, WI 53403

John Deere, Deere & Company
John Deere Road
Moline, IL 61265

Kubota Tractor Corp.
550 W. Artesia Blvd.
Compton, CA 90220

Long Mfg., N.C., Inc.
P.O. Box 1139
Tarboro, NC 27886

MTD Products, Inc.
P.O. Box 36900
Cleveland, OH 44136.

Massey-Ferguson
1901 Bell Ave.
Des Moines, IA 50315

Mitsubishi Tractors Co., LTD
c/o Sumitomo Corp. of America
345 Park Ave
New York, NY 10019

Yanmar Tractor (USA), Inc.
476 Country Club Drive
Bensenville, IL 60106

ing materials is also available.

Jacobsen's equally new G-20D grounds and turf tractor is a more traditional design with a 45-hp diesel, while Kubota announces three new tractors, ranging from 21 to 27 PTO hp and all featuring direct-injection engines.

As manufacturers continue to compete by making their products easier to operate with such features as hydrostatic transmissions and cruise control, as well as more fuel efficient and maintenance free, the consumer only stands to benefit in his choice of a small workhorse tractor. **WT&T**