

Time For a Comeback?

Walk-behind tractors—more versatile than a mule and not nearly as stubborn

by Ron Hall, assistant editor

Gramps loved his mules. They were working animals.

When he wasn't following behind them yanking timber from the hillsides at his southeastern Kentucky homestead, he was churning the rich bottomland along the Big Sandy, barking "gee" and "haa" to get the stubborn critters to go

where he wanted. Gramps' and his mules are long gone but mules of a different sort, two-wheeled mules, might still be the answer to a surprising number of commercial grounds maintenance or landscaping jobs.

The walk-behind tractor, today's mule,

is available in diesel or gasoline and it doesn't depend exclusively on pulling power to get the job done. Power-take-off units working off 8 to 15 hp commercially tough engines and an expanding assortment of attachments give these beasts versatility.

Considering the walk-behind tractor exclusively as a garden machine might not be giving it the credit its due.

Quick fitting attachments can turn it into a tiller, mower (sickle bar, rotary or flail), wood splitter, sprayer, snow blower, grinder or shredder, sweeper, and even a pump. What makes these machines even more attractive for commercial users is their maneuverability. They can almost be turned on a spot and work between rows as close as 22 inches apart, two-wheelers offered

by Mainline, London, OH, as close as 14 inches. In mowing, these tractors can be taken right up under trees and around posts.

"It's very maneuverable with its individual turning brakes," Jim Roberts, operator of Professional Landscaping in Long Beach, CA, reports of his walk-behind Ferrari tractor. "I use it for rotary tilling and grading. My speciality is residential and it's ideal for what I use it for." Roberts reports he can till a customer's 1,500 sq. ft. property in about 30 minutes.

Also, on some models the handlebars swing 180 degrees. That means you can use ground-turning attachments behind the wheels and then make a few adjustments and use mowers, brushes, snow blowers, or brushes in front of them.

"That's the beauty of these machines," Larry Phillips of Phillips Equipment in Minneapolis notes. "It is cheaper for a customer to have a single machine with attachments to garden and do all the other things that have to be done rather than buying a bunch of separate pieces of equipment."

Two-wheelers

It wasn't too many years ago that two-wheel tractors were commonplace on small farms and there was a number of American manufacturers. The walk behinds gave way to riding tractors, however, and now only two American companies manufacture commercial-sized two wheelers. Farmers and vineyard workers walking behind tractors remain a common sight in Europe, however, specifically Italy where many of the products in the U.S. market are manufactured.

Paul Sullivan of Mainline, supplier of a complete line of Italian-manufactured Mainline products, says there are more than a dozen two-wheel tractor manufacturers in Italy and competition to build efficient durable machines is intense. "A farmer might work his entire life on the same five-acre plot and he'll work them with a walk behind. He expects that machine to last a lifetime," Sullivan says.

Durability is high on any user's list and Jim Palmer of Louisville is a good example. He uses a 33-year-

old American-made Gravely to turn more than 170 customer gardens each season, a 12-year-old Gravely ("my new tractor") with a 40-inch deck mower for brush cutting along the river-front properties of exclusive Louisville-area homes. "This guy asked me to cut a seven-acre lot; it hadn't been cut for four years," Palmer reports. "There were saplings and weeds in that field six or seven feet high and he thought it was a joke when I started mowing. But I cut it down. I haven't been able to tear these things (tractors) up."

Versatility saves money

While the two wheelers aren't cheap (\$1,500 is a starting point for a smaller model with rotary tiller) they could offer savings in the long run because of their versatility. With a choice of about 20 attachments these tractors can be used for seed bed preparation in the spring, mowing in the summer, and snow removal in the winter. Sulkies are available if you want to ride and trailers for material transportation.

Bill Waggener of Professional Grounds Maintenance, Atlanta, uses his 8 hp B.C.S. primarily for breaking ground and mixing soil in planter beds, but he intends to put a sulky and trailer behind it this summer to move materials at an office complex. "I've got to move a lot of supplies on site without tearing up the roadways," he says. "The speed is fast enough and it's powerful enough to get somewhere without spending all day."

Many an oldtimer would have been happy to trade in his mules for a single machine that could do as much as a modern two wheel tractor. And he wouldn't have minded a little walking either. □

Manufacturers

B.C.S. Mosa Inc., 1107 L Cordage St., P.O. Box 7620, Charlotte, NC 28217
Ferrari, P.O. Box 5, 116 Paoli St., Verona, WI 53593

Garden Way Manufacturing, 102nd St. and 9th Ave., Troy, NY 12180

Gravely, One Gravely Lane, Clemmons, NC 27012

Mainline, P.O. Box 348, London, OH 43140
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