

TRIMMERS COME OF AGE

Almost all string trimmers are fast and efficient. You've got to look at small differences to find the one best suited to your work.

by Jay Holtzman, contributing editor

We're lucky to have string trimmers. They're fast, efficient and give us an alternative to expensive hand trimming and using potentially harmful herbicides.

Because they handily meet the needs of a broad variety of landscape professionals, in a relatively short time string trimmers have established themselves as one of the basic tools of landscape management.

But the string trimmer judged best for any application is largely a matter of the particular demands of the job at hand, personal preference and the vagaries of personal experience.

"All of them have drawbacks and advantages. You have to look at the kind of work you're doing and match the trimmer to the work," says Robert Mayer, landscape manager for Plant Care Co. of Dallas.

The first prototype nylon-line grass trimmer was invented in 1972 by George Ballas, a Houston entrepreneur, who named and trademarked his product "Weed Eater," according to Poulan/Weed Eater of Shreveport, La. Weed Eater remains a proprietary trademark of the company despite the widely-abused use of the name as a generic term for string trimmers in general. Weed Eater sells six million trimmers a year and 22 million overall. But today at least a dozen other companies also make and sell the trimmers to both homeowners and professionals.

Weeded out

With so many manufacturers of string trimmers, it can be hard to separate the essentials of good performance from sales promotion, and to choose a good value. But since many manufac-



Almost all landscapers interviewed said durability, safety and operator comfort are the most important elements to consider before buying a string trimmer.

turers jumped into the market with many fundamental design differences, the bad has been weeded out, leaving generally reliable designs.

"Trimmers have gotten better. They're lightweight and powerful enough," says Steve Wilster, president, Town and Country Landscaping, Inc. of Melbourne, Fla. "The manufacturers have ironed out their problems and many trimmers are very similar now."

Almost all the landscape managers we talked to cited a different brand of string trimmer as their preference. By the same token, none singled out any one brand for criticism. But many differences remain, and those small dif-

ferences can make a big difference in performance over the long haul.

Virtually all the landscape professionals interviewed by LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT mentioned the same three factors as being keys to what they expect and need from a string trimmer. They were: durability/dependability, safety, and operator comfort/ease of use. That the unit would have the power to perform well was assumed, which speaks well for the many choices available.

"Dependability is what we look for first," says Wilster. "We'd had trouble with other brands of trimmers over the last dozen years until about six years ago when we went with Echo exclusively. They seem to hold up really well. We can get a good season out of them before we have to rebuild the carburetor or do similar repairs, as long as the men service them correctly."

Operator comfort and the ease of use are important factors in safe use. The weight of the machine and whether or not the operator uses a harness or shoulder strap to support it all come into play.

"We primarily use the Echo 2500, which is lightweight enough that the guys don't get tired using it," says Wilster. They can hold it in their hands and not have to worry about having something slung over their shoulder to hold it up, yet it is powerful enough to get things done quickly and not bog down in heavy grass."

"When we use the 3000—which probably weighs 25 percent more than the 2500—the operators must use the strap, which is a little confining. They

use it, but it doesn't seem to be that functional," he adds.

Paul Woods, landscape operations manager for Garden of Memories, Myrtle Hill Cemetery in Tampa, Fla., has opted for Shindaiwa 35s.

"It's an important decision because of the volume of work we do with trimmers," notes Wilster. "We run a crew of five string trimmers. In our application it is one of the most important pieces of equipment we use."

He chose Shindaiwa trimmers for their performance, their ease of maintenance, and the availability of spare parts.

Strange bedfellows

"Mechanical reliability is the bed-fellow of preventive maintenance. That is easily done on these units," Wilster says.

"When I came here four years ago, they had a hodge-podge of equipment. After experiencing some problems with power and with replacement parts, we came across Shindaiwa. They were reasonably priced, we were offered some good service agreements and we have been able to get the parts we need," he explains.

"With some other brands we had a problem obtaining the parts we needed to keep the equipment running longer—I'm speaking of small

things like clutches and clutch springs," he adds.

Trimmers are doubly important to Woods because his operation relies on them almost exclusively for controlling growth in the cemetery and memorial park.

Woods has also been pleased with the optional aluminum "speed head" with which the trimmers have been equipped. "Working in a memorial park and monument cemetery, we were wearing out the plastic reservoir heads extremely fast. We were going through \$5 worth of brass eyelets a day on the hole where the line feeds out," he says.

The speed heads don't hold a reservoir of line. Instead, line is cut into 10-inch lengths and laced something like shoelaces through a series of holes in the head, leaving several four-inch pieces as the cutting blades.

In addition, Woods' crews add a twist to working with their trimmers. "One thing we do to facilitate working around markers and monuments is to keep the handlebars in position and rotate the trimmer shaft and cutting unit about 40 degrees to the horizontal. This way the operator doesn't have to try to angle himself to put a nice edge around a monument. When we need to trim a broad area, it's a simple matter to rotate the shaft and head back to the horizon-

tal," he explains.

Because of the heavy volume of trimming, all operators use shoulder harnesses with the trimmers.

"We use a double-shoulder harness, a true harness, not a shoulder strap. My men like it more than a shoulder strap because it centers the load and reduces the physical exertion and strain of having this load of about 12 pounds hanging from one shoulder for seven hours a day," Woods says.

Plant Care uses Echo and Green Machine trimmers. Mayer points out, as do several other landscape managers, that the harness or sling used with a trimmer can make a big difference to the operator using the machine.

"As much as I've tried to get my men to use the harness, they tend to fight it because they are picking up and putting down the trimmers so often during the day. The Echo harness is more trouble to get into than some others, so the crews tend to lose them or throw them away. The Green Machine, on the other hand, you can just put over your shoulder, and it has a padded strap, which I like. Either machine gives good performance, though," Mayer adds.

Another landscaper who has found important differences in the harness arrangements of different trimmers is Don

Emphasizing trimmer safety

In addition to the mechanical reliability of trimmers, landscape managers are concerned about their safety aspects. Most, if not all trimmers available today, have standard safety features such as a guard over the rotating line. But the action of the spinning line has danger potential that can only be countered by safe operating methods.

"A string trimmer will really pick up stones and fling them, and it will put some good velocity on them, too," says Steve Wilster, Town 'n' Country Landscaping of Melbourne, Fla. "It's best to wear long pants. You've always got to wear eye protection. And it is important to keep the guard on the machine, even if it is an inconvenience."

Proper use is also important, although the speed and versatility of a string trimmer can tempt the operator to use it improperly to save time.

Safe operation is also a high priority for Paul Woods of Garden of Memories/Myrtle Hill Cemetery in Tampa, Fla. "Operator safety goes hand-in-hand with operator comfort," Woods says. "I require my guys to operate string trimmers for six to seven hours a day when most landscape management companies may have only two or three guys that run them a couple hours a day."

He also requires trimmer operators to wear goggles and particle masks, uniforms with long pants and leather workboots.

Safety problems with string trimmers have been almost nil at Plant Care in Dallas, says Robert Mayer, because "we enforce safety regulations on all our



Steve Wilster: "String trimmer manufacturers have ironed out their problems and many trimmers are very similar now."

the trimmer, you can take the bark right off a tree or do the same kind of thing to your leg," notes Don Davis of Lawns Unlimited in Sussex, N.J.

Mayer handles the problem by giving good safety and equipment education to his crews. "You've got to be very vigilant," he says. "You've always got to be concerned about the problem of girdling trees because of the amount of damage you can do in a short amount of time. We're very careful in our training program for new crew members. And when we familiarize them with trimmers we take pains to highlight this problem particularly," he adds.

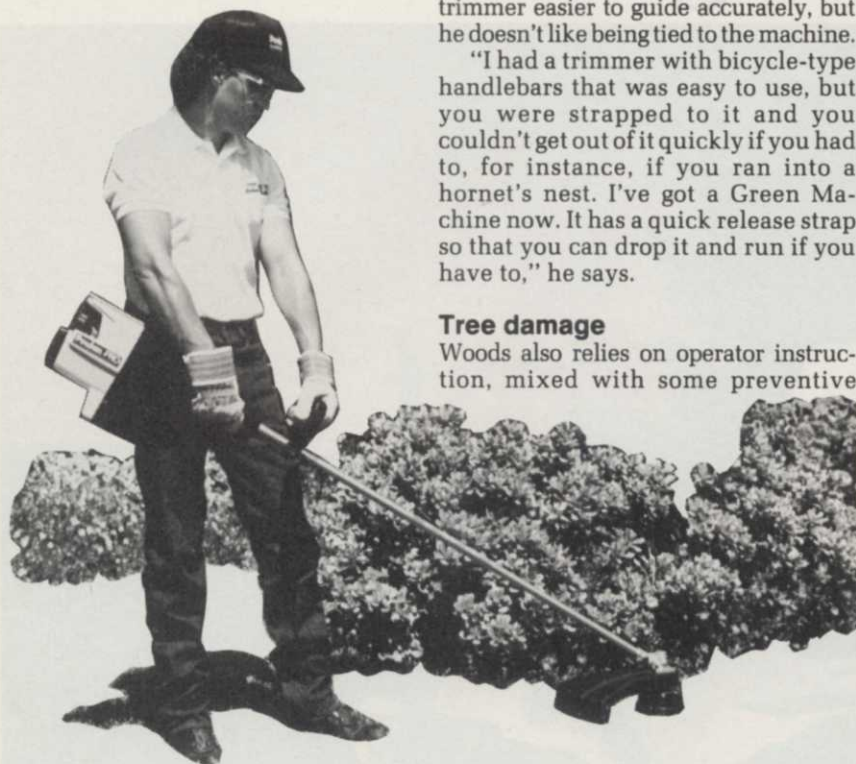
—Jay Holtzman □

equipment. The men must wear safety glasses or face shields, long uniform pants and work shoes, and the guards must be on the trimmers," he says.

The ability to guide a trimmer accurately is very important because of their potential for damage—swiftly inflicting potentially lethal damage to small trees.

"The user has to be trained properly and know what he's doing. If you aren't good at guiding

Most trimmers available today have standard safety features such as a guard over the rotating line.



Davis, owner of Lawns Unlimited of Sussex, N.J. Davis says he always uses a harness strap with the trimmer because it eases the fatigue of use and makes the trimmer easier to guide accurately, but he doesn't like being tied to the machine.

"I had a trimmer with bicycle-type handlebars that was easy to use, but you were strapped to it and you couldn't get out of it quickly if you had to, for instance, if you ran into a hornet's nest. I've got a Green Machine now. It has a quick release strap so that you can drop it and run if you have to," he says.

Tree damage

Woods also relies on operator instruction, mixed with some preventive

measures. "Trees can be a very severe problem with trimmers. Most trees under two inches (in diameter)—Drake elms and camphor trees here have thin, easily-cut bark. With live oaks and Laurel oaks, the bark tends to be a little heavier and they can stand a little more abuse. But some of our trees have wounds as the result of mechanical injury from string trimmers that are healing over now," he says.

To prevent this, his crews now dish out an area around trees so they don't have to trim right up to the trunk. Woods also has considered using flexible black plastic drain hose, cut to 10 inches, split and placed around the trunks of small trees as a shield.

Although generally landscape managers are well pleased with the trimmers they use, there are differences in styles and types that any landscaper must take a close look at if he's to get the trimmer best suited to his needs. Purchase price is less important than value over the life of the machine. And a machine that is just that little bit easier to use can help prevent an injury or property damage that can be very costly in the long run. As in buying anything, let the buyer beware and remember that you get what you pay for. **LM**

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