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.

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

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.”

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 differences 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.

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“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 bedfellow 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 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 horizontal.”

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 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 the trimmer, you can take the bark right off a tree or do the same kind of thing to your legs,” 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 •
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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.

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