

WINTER, A TIME OF R&R FOR YOUR EQUIPMENT

Like your body, landscaping equipment can last longer if you take care of it year round. Shenandoah Valley Golf Club has found secrets that increase its machines' life expectancies.

by Jay Holtzman, contributing editor



The thorough off-season maintenance performed by mechanic Calvin Smith (l) at Shenandoah Valley Golf Club allows superintendent Eric Linde (r) to clip about \$15,000 from his annual equipment budget.

If you're like most landscape professionals, you push your equipment pretty hard during the busy season. The job demands it. But just as demanding is the stress and strain on equipment. Machines that are used hard must be carefully cared for, and the off-season is the perfect time to completely clean, inspect, repair and refurbish equipment which has put in a long season of work.

Not that any once-a-year routine can make up for a failure to maintain mowers, trucks, hand-held equipment and other machines throughout the year. Proper maintenance has to be a constant effort. But winter is the season when there aren't any excuses for failing to do the job 100 percent.

"There's a lot you can do in the off-season," says Eric Linde, superintendent of the Shenandoah Valley Golf

Club in Front Royal, Va. "In fact, it's the one time of year when we can really be thorough with our equipment.

"This time of year also gives us the leeway to let a piece of equipment go down for quite a while. During the season, we have such demands on the equipment that we can't let it go down."

The off-season is the time to go back and make perfect those repairs that were done expediently rather than the best way during the season, Linde explains.

"Let's say a piece breaks on a tractor during the season. We may weld that piece together while it is still mounted on the tractor because we need to keep using it. The winter time allows us to go back and fix that thing once and for all. We can examine the

source of the problem and address it at that point."

By the same token, the off-season allows time for careful and thorough maintenance as well, and that starts with cleaning the equipment.

"Typically, when a piece of equipment goes out of service for the year, it will be steam-cleaned from head to toe," Linde says. "That means all the cowlings and everything else will come off the machine. Then it is painted, too, if it's required.

"It's also the time of year when we have time to rate batteries, go over belts and hoses that aren't often seen, and examine all the other parts that can deteriorate or wear."

Two-fold maintenance

It's a period when you can get ready for the coming of spring as well as catch up from the previous season.

"That's when we do things like pack all the wheel bearings. It might be that a certain truck only needs to be packed once a year, or even once every two years. But we can't afford to let it wait. We don't know how much we are going to use that piece of equipment next season; that's why our annual maintenance program goes much further. In the summer if a brake feels bad, we adjust it. But in the winter, we pull the hubs, examine the brakes and do what's necessary," Linde explains.

Autumn's annual maintenance chores are scheduled by Linde and his full-time mechanic, Calvin Smith, together. "Calvin and I will schedule how we want to go through this period, because we often run our dump trucks and some other equipment well into the season. Then he directs from there," Linde says.

Formally scheduling a full maintenance program in the off-season helps Linde maintain a crew of 13 year-round out of a summer season peak of 20 persons.

This crew not only maintains the

Disposable equipment?

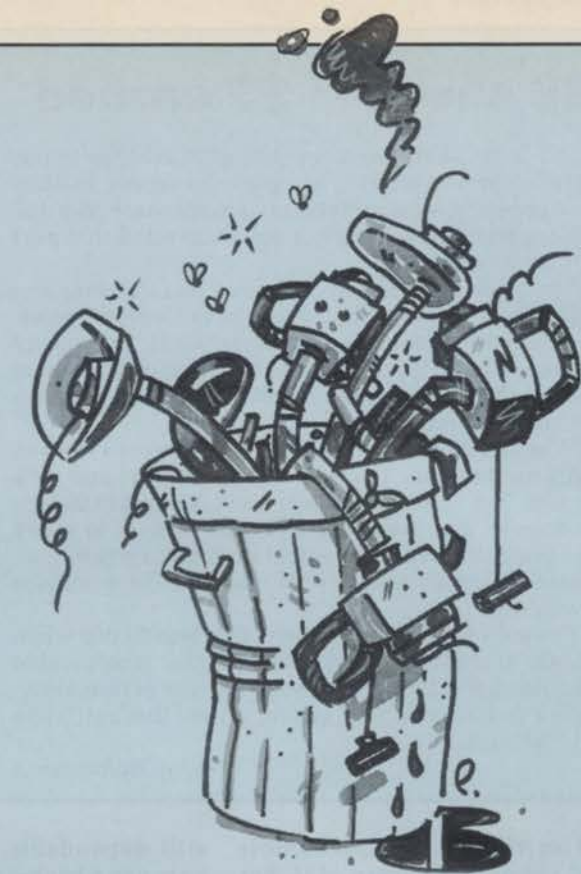
As careful as most professionals appear to be about maintenance—everyone stresses the need for a good, year-round maintenance program—many find that some small, hand-held equipment such as string trimmers don't repay careful maintenance in the same way as larger machinery.

"We almost always replace trimmers every season," explains Tim Haney, executive director at Woodlawn Cemetery, Toledo, Ohio. "We are using them about 40 hours a week through most of the summer and up until the leaves fall, and some 55 to 60 hours a week in the spring. Somebody told me that was like driving a car 250,000 miles."

Adds Eric Linde of Shenandoah Valley Golf Club: "We go out and buy a good one and then we find someone local to maintain it, but after it starts to develop downtime for little things, we just throw it away. Don't hang it on the wall because it isn't going to make you any more money. When a guy in the field needs one of these, he needs it to work. In the contracting business it gets down to the minute as to how we are going to make our money and if something like that doesn't work, it's just like you're throwing money on the ground."

Even equipment like string trimmers that many professionals consider disposable can play a role in keeping crews working effectively.

"I try to hold onto our trimmers until about the first week in May so that when the guys start to get discouraged with the old ones, I can break out the new equipment," explains Haney. "That way, they work more efficiently through Memorial Day, which is obvi-



ously a key time in our year. This has worked out well because the guys feel good about the new trimmers and the novelty doesn't wear off before the holiday."

—Jay Holtzman □

27-hole golf course, but works for a related outside contracting service with annual volume of some \$250,000. All in all, they maintain a fairly large stable of equipment, including eight triplex mowers, two rough units, two fairway units, three tractors, a backhoe, assorted utility and pickup trucks—the equipment for what Linde calls "a well-equipped 27-hole course"—plus the compressors and air-conditioning system for the clubhouse.

"We're not undercapitalized at all," Linde notes, "so we're very mainline in equipment: Toro and Jacobsen mowers and Chevy trucks. We buy what we feel is best."

Divvying it up

Once the work is scheduled, the mechanic and crew divide it between them.

"When it comes to ordering parts and the technical stuff, the mechanic does it. But most of the time he tries to get our full-timers to work on a single project each," Linde explains. "If we are doing a brake job on a dump truck, for example, one of the full-time crew will get the truck up on jacks, take the wheels off and clean out the drums. Then Calvin

can take a look at it."

One man generally stays with the job until it is done, he says.

"We try to put the guy on a job until it's completed. If the job requires parts, for example, then he runs to get them. He does all the set-up work and helps finish up when Calvin is done. The mechanic does the actual repair. But it helps make the guy feel better

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about the operation when he can stay with a job all the way through," Linde explains.

As thoughtful as this approach to maintenance is, Linde stresses that though it's thorough, it isn't fancy.

"Our place is looked on as a model by the equipment manufacturers. But we aren't doing anything fancy like X-raying the equipment. We're just

being very thorough with what the manufacturer suggests," he says.

Such a thorough approach to end-of-season maintenance, and to maintenance in general, requires good organization. Linde has found a simple tool that he says has been a tremendous help in keeping his shop in order: a large metal file like those found in auto parts and hardware stores for holding catalogs.

"This file holds our entire collection of parts books, maintenance manuals and other paperwork that comes with the equipment. It's the heart of our shop; it's what our inventory is based on," he says. "Whenever any piece of equipment comes in, the paperwork goes in this file. Anyone can go in there and look up a part or find the schematic drawing for what they're working on. If they're working on a machine somewhere else, they can come in and find the manual they need and take it with them. If we need a part number or a phone number, we don't have to dig through a drawer. It's right there," Linde notes.

Best of all, as effective as the file is, it was inexpensive—just \$125.

"I rate my equipment by how many years it should last," Linde relates. "And it's outlasting the years I

\$\$ saved = \$\$ earned

By and large, there are plenty of good reasons to pay careful attention to your equipment's winter maintenance program. Most professionals agree that every dollar spent on maintenance is a dollar invested that pays itself back.

"We spend many, many dollars on maintenance, but it's still the cheapest thing to do," says Herbert Brown, superintendent at Wandermere Golf Course in Spokane, Wash. He points to the high cost of equipment as one of the best reasons for giving maintenance practices close attention.

"When you were paying \$3,500 for a greens mower, people used to trade them in every few years and get a new one. But now you're paying \$12,000 or \$13,000 for that mower, and you can't afford to trade it in every three years. You've got to maintain it and keep it."

Such maintenance pays for itself in the examples Brown cites.

"I've got a 1974 fairway mower that was \$9,000 when I bought it and that now costs \$35,000 (comparable model new). It's still running well because of its maintenance. I've also got a 1977 greens mower that's still like new," he says.

—Jay Holtzman □



It's more cost effective to sink money into maintaining equipment than replacing it, says Shenandoah Valley mechanic Joe Casteel.

project for it because my mechanic is so good about taking care of it. For example, I've got a 1978 greens mower that is supposed to last six years. Six years is enough. But it is

still dependable, even though we now use a back-up unit."

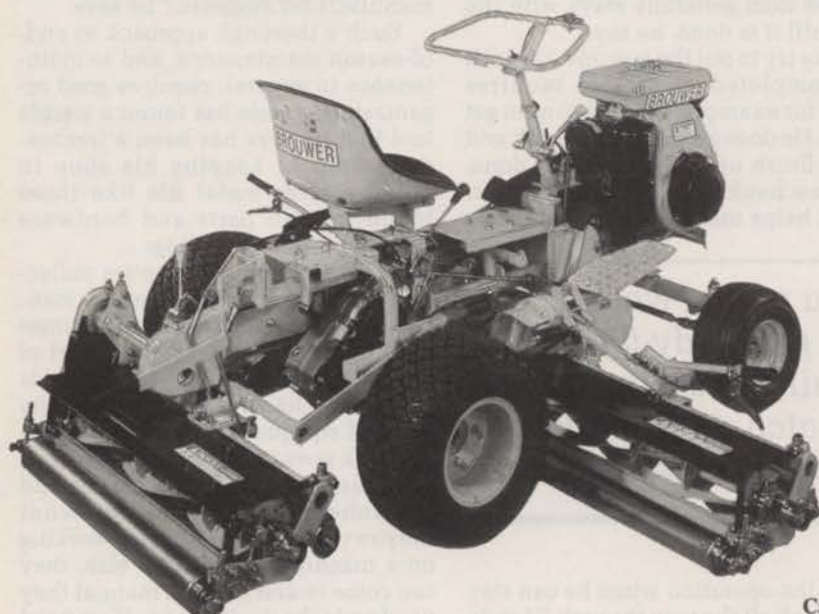
This has a direct and positive effect on his budget.

"We figure we have to spend about

\$50,000 a year on equipment, but for the last couple of years I've said we can do fine on \$35,000. I can go to the board of directors and say we don't need to buy all that equipment." LM

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