



Snow removal equipment: eliminate any surprises

by RON HALL / Senior Editor

One of your goals as a snow removal contractor is to eliminate as many surprises as you can before you begin moving snow. This is particularly true when it comes to your equipment.

After all, you can't use weather as an excuse when you're in the snow removal business. It's not like being a day late in mowing a property or building a stone walkway. When it snows, you have to provide service. Now.

But things do go wrong with equipment, even for the most conscientious service provider. One contractor, in fact, says that even in the best snow operations, only 90 percent of everything goes well.

Preparing equipment for snow removal begins well in

advance of the first autumn or winter storm. It starts with matching equipment with the services that you provide.

One of the first mistakes some contractors make is that they don't purchase the right truck for snow removal.

"You should consult a dealer or a snow plow distributor to make sure that you get the truck spec'd properly, that you get a truck with a heavy enough front axle, that you get the proper charging system, that you get the proper transmission cooler, and you get the so-called snow plow preparation package," advises Don Anderson of Scherer Truck Equipment in Auburn Hills, Mich. "You have to make sure that the truck is able to be outfitted with a plow."

Anderson points out that certain extended-cab pickups, because of federal motor vehicle safety standards, can't be outfitted with plows. "That can be a real surprise to a guy who buys a \$30,000 truck," says Scherer.

Rob Harris of Knapheide Truck Equipment Co. in Kansas City adds that it's also important that the proper size plow is fitted to each truck. This information is readily available from snow equipment manufacturers. Or, consult with a knowledgeable dealer or distributor; they'll be glad to help.

Maintenance

Larry Wright of Wright's Landscape Services whose company provides snow removal in the "down river" area

Tip #3:

If you don't have a full-time mechanic on staff, have a good list of people you can rely on in emergencies.

of Detroit, recognizes the importance of matching the proper equipment with jobs—and of maintaining his equipment, too.

Two areas in his trucks—mostly Ford F350s and F450s and several larger trucks like F700s—receive special consideration: transmissions and electrical systems.

"We make sure that all of our trucks go into the transmission shop every fall, before winter, and the transmission fluid is drained, and they check all the filters and evaluate the condition of the transmissions," says Wright. (After 20 years of professional snow removal, Wright strongly favors automatic transmissions, even in larger trucks. "The fatigue on a driver is real tough with a stick shift. On a small truck, I wouldn't even think about using a stick shift," he says.)

"Electrical problems are insidious because you don't see them coming," says Wright. For instance, an electrical short can play havoc with a vehicle's lights. Hint: make sure that when an installer puts a dump body on a bare chassis and cab that he uses weather-tight sealed connections for splicing into the wiring harness.

As far as heavy duty items like plows, Wright says regular inspections will usually turn up cracks and evidences of fatigue before they fail. He urges his operators to periodically look over their equipment.

"If you're big enough to have a full-time mechanic on your staff, that's fantastic," he adds. "If not, you should have a pretty good list of people you can rely on for emergency service on your equipment. Whether it's somebody who can come out and do some welding, or a mechanic. Having someone with a strong electrical background who can trace those types of problems quickly is important, too."

Wright says snow removal equipment has improved quite a bit in the 20 years he's been in business. He started out using four-speed Jeeps, and he remembers some contractors still using plows that they had to shove by hand into the angle that they desired. Now, of course, electronic controls from inside the cab make blade operation a push-button affair.

Also very handy, he says, is the quick-attach plow mounting systems. (Western Products' UniMount System and Fisher Engineering's Minute Mount are examples.) This allows a contractor to remove the plow mounting assembly, including frame, lights, and pump very easily.

Even with these improvements, it's still essential that you prepare your trucks and equipment now to avoid those mid-

winter surprises. Remember, if your equipment isn't working, you aren't making money.

Spreaders

You also need the proper spreading equipment for any de-icers you will be applying.

"Someone riding in the back of the truck with a shovel is a waste of time, money and material," says Bob Guy of Akzo Nobel Salt.

Some smaller spreaders use a crank or run off the truck's electrical system. Other, bigger, spreaders run off the truck's primary drive and give a much more accurate dispersal.

"I'm partial to several types of polyethylene hopper spreaders that mount on the back of a pick-up," says Guy. "You can put a couple hundred pounds of de-icer straight from the bag into the hopper."

If you don't calibrate your equipment frequently and use too much material, it's hard on the plant life, it's hard on the concrete, and it's hard on the cars. Highway departments calibrate spreaders once a month, Guy notes. Landscapers should calibrate as often as possible, and check to make sure that there are no blockages before every snowfall.

Train, train, train

In the Minneapolis area, Henning, Rhode & Associates provides snow removal for a sizable number of townhouses, condos and some commercial property, too. But George Rhode says that his company wouldn't put even an experienced employee into one of its 35 trucks without proper training, much of it hands-on.

"They usually ride with an experienced person first," says Rhode. "Then they get turned loose, but with supervision from somebody else that's close by, maybe on the other side of the parking lot or on a nearby driveway."

This training also includes three or four hours by one of the company's three mechanics about how snow removal equipment works, with some instruction on diagnosing minor equipment problems that can be remedied on the street.

"When it snows, we usually put everything out there. We're going at it hard right from the beginning, so that if something goes wrong, we're not behind," says Rhode.