

# DURABILITY RULES

BY VICKY POULSEN

## Three veteran landscape contractors discuss what they value in hand-held and backpack equipment

**L**andscapers know the only way to keep lawns, beds and other landscape features nice and tidy is to use an arsenal of hand-held and backpack equipment.

Compared to mowers, trucks and small utility vehicles, these products are lightweights. But they make up for it in comfort, allowing the operator to tackle a job with ease and less fatigue.

Like their hefty counterparts, they're heavily used, operator-abused and on the

front line of every lawn maintenance job. They do more than their fair share of work, especially during peak season, which is why their life span is usually between one and three years depending on quality and how much they're used and maintained.

We wanted to get some personal insight on this type of equipment, so we interviewed three contractors from various parts of the country. Although each contractor's operations differed in size, experience and locale, they all seemed to want the same things in their hand-held and backpack equipment. Here's what they had to say:

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**LARGE CONTRACTOR**

**Name:** Joe Janssen  
**Title:** President  
**Company:** Stiles Landscape Co. (SLC)  
**Location:** Pompano Beach, FL  
**2000 revenues:** \$9 million  
**Business mix:** 100% commercial  
**Employees:** 190  
**Company profile:** A full-service landscape company, they've been in business 20 years as a division of Stiles Corporation. Stiles Corp., which focuses on real estate development and construction with offices in Atlanta, Nashville and Charlotte, was founded in 1950. Around 70% of SLC's business is devoted to lawn maintenance. They only serve commercial accounts such as office campuses, city government facilities, homeowners associations, resorts and sports stadiums (Miami Dolphins football and National Car Rental Center Arena stadiums). Of their 190 employees, 150 work out in the field, and they can have as many as 10 roving



crews for large job sites. They received two awards from ALCA last year for the quality of work they put into Dolphins and National Car Rental stadiums.

**Hand-held/backpack equipment used:** Power edge trimmers, stick edgers, weed eaters, pole saws and chain saws, along with backpack blowers and hand-held blowers.

**Finance method:** Purchased with cash. Plans to spend up to \$33,000 dollars for this category of equipment next year.

**Important features:** "The serviceability of the equipment, the safety and the ability to maintain parts quickly and economically. We've identified certain manufacturers we can count on in terms of durability and pricing that's in line with the competition. What separates one product from the pack is how easy it is for my shop to work on it and the ability to obtain parts through its vendors. We cannot have a small tool idle for a week while waiting for a part to arrive."

**Service:** "Each foremen has a radio, so they're in constant communication with all of their crews in case there's a problem. We don't provide our crews with spare equipment in case something breaks down. If it's critical to the operation that day, we'll dispatch a mechanic to the site who can bring a spare or repair it there or back at the shop."

**Trimmer debate:** "Trimmers should be used to trim grass, not to edge beds or hardscape areas. Many times, this equipment is used incorrectly and can harm those areas."

**Safety:** "Through our association with ALCA, we've provided our employees with a series of training videos available in both English and Spanish. We then follow-up with extensive hands-on training before any employee is allowed to use the equipment. Protective gear such as safety glasses, ear plugs and long pants is a must."

**Advice to other contractors:** "Look for manufacturers who provide a durable product, top-notch technical support and just-in-time delivery for your specific application. If you can do that, everything else is pretty easy."

**MEDIUM CONTRACTOR**

**Name:** Ralph Thomas  
**Title:** Vice president  
**Company:** Beebe Landscape Services Inc.  
**Location:** East Windsor, CT  
**2000 revenues:** \$1.2 million  
**Business mix:** 90% commercial  
**Employees:** 25  
**Company profile:** Founded in 1986, 60% of their business is devoted to maintenance, 10% to lawncare, 10% to snow removal/plowing and 20% to landscape construction/special services. Customer base is mostly commercial with services to insurance companies, industrial landscapes and condo associations. Employs 25 people during peak season.

**Hand-held/backpack equipment used:** String trimmers, stick edgers, backpack blowers, chain saws, power brooms, brush cutters and hedge trimmers.

**Purchasing decisions:** "We rely on feedback from our crew supervisors and field technicians. Price is also a consideration. We base our decision on the fact that we have to sell a certain number of hours of service per cost of the equipment to recover purchase and maintenance costs. We purchase our equipment from one local supplier, but our blowers come from Home Depot. This is a people business, and we have a loyal relationship with our vendor. We have one mechanic to perform major repairs and other personnel to troubleshoot for minor things."

**Finance method:** "We pay cash over a 30-day billing cycle. Anything under \$1,000 is non-depreciable, so it doesn't make sense for us to finance such small amounts of money and incur interest expenses. And it doesn't make sense to invest \$250 in a string trimmer. We regard them as disposable items."

## TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Backpack blowers like these let crews make short work of large maintenance projects.

**Important features:** Durability, user-friendliness and price.

**Service:** "If equipment breaks down, the crew will make do with what they have. If they can't, we'll send a mechanic to drop off a spare. If it's a critical item like a stick edger and they only have one, a mechanic will go out and fix it."

**Training:** This company takes its training seriously. They've recently signed on with a national training program and have sent their managers to workshops presented by motivational speaker Jim Paluch. While there, managers were asked to develop a 52-week employee training course, covering everything from paperwork flow to reloading a string trimmer. They also hold mandatory weekly safety meetings with all their employees. "Our number one concerns are our employees and the public — neither one of those two should be exposed to physical injury or risk just to get business done."

**Advice to other contractors:** "Never use equipment beyond its usefulness. Many contractors tend to hold onto a piece of equipment for four or five years and a mechanic is constantly working on it. You're investing a lot of money and getting little in return."



### SMALL CONTRACTOR

**Name:** Jaret Bishop

**Title:** Owner

**Company:** Custom Lawn Care & Landscaping

**Location:** Washington Court House, OH

**2000 revenues:** \$500,000

**Business mix:** 90% commercial

**Employees:** 10

**Company profile:** In business for five years. Around 90% of its accounts are commercial/industrial, including two mall outlets, three K-Marts and three truck stops. Services are: 45% maintenance, 40% installation and 15% snow removal. Also a major mowing subcontractor for Truegreen/Chemlawn. Operates a landscape installation and mulching crew as well as two mowing crews.

**Biggest challenge this season:** Snow and ice. "We own six trucks and subcontract another 15. We need to clear the snow before 8 a.m. for most of our businesses and by 10 a.m. for outlet malls. Our blowers are working constantly, so we expect dependability, performance and comfort out of them." Salt has been their main concern this year, since they've only dropped their plows twice. His company drops 120,000 lbs. of salt at customer sites during an entire season. As of the end of December, they dumped four semi-loads, or 80,000 lbs.

**Hand-held/backpack equipment used:** "We use it all. Each crew is sent out with one zero-turn, one walk-behind, one backpack blower and two weed eaters. Larger crews

never leave the shop with less than four weed eaters."

**Purchasing decision:** "We always talk to our foremen before we decide what to buy. I like to stay with the same product if we've had good performance with it in the past."

**Service:** "Regular maintenance is a must. We just built a new shop on more than an acre of land. We've installed jacks and invested thousands of dollars, but it will save us money and time in the long run. During peak season, we have one part-time mechanic who works from 9 p.m. to 2 a.m. This prevents any interruption of service to our customers and keeps us on schedule."

**Training:** "All new employees are required to work closely with the crew foreman for the first week. They start out working with blowers and weed eaters, then mowers."

**Trimming guidelines:** "We found out that letting employees do their own thing with weed eaters works best as long as it's the quickest and most efficient method. I'm left-handed, and I wish there was a weed eater for lefties or righties to go in the direction of the head as it turns. I tell the guys to go to the left when they're working along a pool so the grass isn't blown at you."

**Advice to other contractors:** "Always find a dealer that has equipment to demo for you. We got burned by a weed eater manufacturer who didn't offer such a program, so we never buy without trying it out first."



◀ PHOTO COURTESY KAWASAKI

# Packin' a punch

**Manufacturers talk about what makes their hand-held and backpack equipment so powerful**

*How do manufacturers of hand-held/backpack equipment turn their small, two-cycle engine products into virtual powerhouses that are expected to meet stringent clean air regulations and be quieter, more ergonomically correct and safer to use? And why do some hand-held tools seem to fit like a glove while others cause operator fatigue and blistering skin? We wondered about that, too, and decided to go right to the leading manufacturers of these products to find out the answers to all our questions*



◀ PHOTO COURTESY STILES LANDSCAPE COMPANY

## CHAPIN MANUFACTURING

Greg Condon, Vice President

**Hand-held/backpack equipment:** Hand-held compressed air sprayers available in 1-, 2- or 3-gal. sizes.

**Product design trends:** "We've developed some poly sprayers with an extra wide mouth for easier filling and cleaning and less spill, contamination and germal contact. We've also developed a sprayer with a filter inside that rests towards the bottom of the tank instead of near the nozzle where contaminants can get trapped. Ours is a self-cleaning filtration system that's not entrapped in a tube or canister but floating in an ocean of floating solutions. When you stop spraying, it never gets plugged."

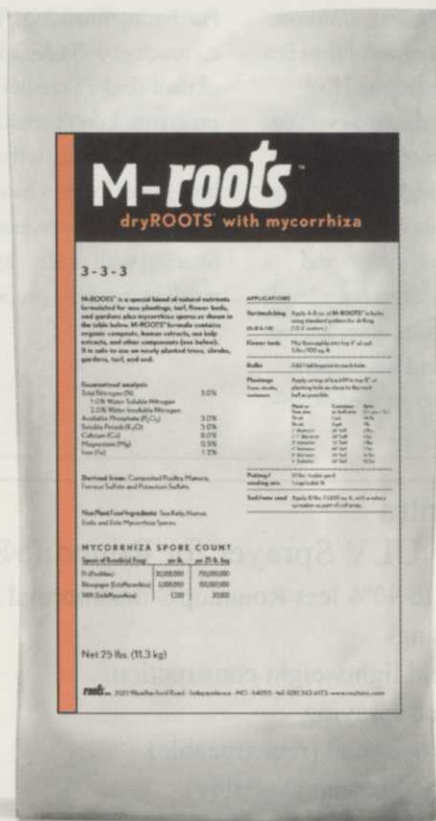
**Safety/training:** "We'd like to see the industry move to pre-packaged materials requiring a lower level of training for the applicant. This would prevent the operator from over-applying or underapplying and protect him from dermal contact when trying to mix chemicals. There's also a need to redesign packaging for chemicals. We urge operators to wear protective apparel and read the instructions on every product prior to use. The most important thing to do when handling this equipment is to wear protective eye gear."

**Purchasing/financing:** "We're in a cost-competitive area — we have products that are already cheaper than commercial products in the turf area. You can spend a little more and have it last for years. Most specify a commercial buying grade and will pay more for those better hoses, brass nozzles and metal shut-offs."

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**JOHN DEERE**

**Charlie Durand,  
Manager of Sales &  
Training/Portable Power  
Equipment**

**Hand-held/backpack equipment products:** Chain saws, trimmers, edgers and blowers.

**Product design trends:** "Products that meet or exceed EPA's CARB/Tier II low-emissions standards and reduce noise pollution are two key areas being pushed to the forefront. In our small-engine designs, emissions are lowered because of the elimination of an unburned fuel charge during the two-cycle engine's exhaust stroke. With our ecoPOWER engines, which reduce emissions on most of our trimmers, brush cutters and blowers, we address noise levels on these products as well. Two-cycle equipment has become more reliable over the last sev-

eral years with electronic ignition and lifetime warranties on ignitions and shafts. Ergonomics is another important feature we have to address. Commercial end users are looking for more powerful, lighter units than they've had in the past."

**Training/safety:** "We have to meet strict ANSI standards in this country and around the world. We have programs/manuals addressing customer safety. We also conduct bilingual safety seminars at our dealerships."

**Purchasing/financing:** "Most contractors will take advantage of their dealer's credit or lease programs. I don't see a lot of contractors going to the 'big-box' stores for purchases. The market trend is professionals remaining with dealers to get their products serviced properly."

**HUSQVARNA**

**Ken Taylor, Business Unit  
Manager for commercial  
lawn & garden**

**Hand-held/backpack products:** Blowers, brush cutters, chain saws, edgers, hedge trimmers, pruning/hand-planting and digging tools, power brooms, trimmers, equipment storage racks and safety wear.

**Product design trends:** "Noise, emissions, overall environmental concerns, ergonomics and safety are important in designing products to meet end users needs. In our E-tech technology, the "E" stands for engineering, ergonomics, efficiency and economy. The Husqvarna E-tech uses a combination of features to reduce certain harmful exhaust emissions and the smoke and odors associated with them without sacrificing fuel economy and power. In regard to er-

gonomics, providing solutions that reduce operator fatigue and enhance overall performance are our benchmarks. Being a Swedish company, we're all too well aware of mandated European designs, many of which were introduced by Husqvarna.

**Training/Safety:** "We

are the sponsor of Chain Saw Safety Awareness Month — but our efforts on safety go beyond chain saws. Safety means safety training (which we're actively involved in through trade associations and a support staff of end user experts), safety apparel and safety features like our inertia chain brake and ergonomic design to reduce operator fatigue. Retaining/finding qualified help is one of the key challenges facing employers.

**Purchasing/financing:** "We offer four ways to assist our retailers in serving the commercial customer. Cash is always 'king,' but our retailers offer revolving charge plans and extended financing and leasing programs supported by Husqvarna to assist them in making the purchase process simple."

**LESCO**

**Pete Thompson, senior  
product manager for  
equipment**

**Hand-held/backpack equipment:** Hand-held power products such as string trimmers, hand edgers, hedge trimmers and backpack blowers made by Kawasaki.

**Product design trends:** "Everyone is concerned with emissions and meeting the EPA's CARB Tier II requirements. Our products meet or exceed regulations for

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noise and/or emissions.

**Training/safety:** "Over the last several years, we've packaged safety goggles/shields with our products. To help prevent injuries, we also ensure all our packaging is properly labeled so there is no misunderstanding when it comes to the right way to use these products."

**Purchasing/financing:** "We know that people purchase equipment on an annual basis. Better-built equipment will last more than one season, and products that can be rebuilt instead of replaced may last two to three seasons. Durability is becoming a factor now because contractors usage is up. From our standpoint, a large percentage of our customers are buying with credit, but that's also based on the size of the contractor's business and how long they've been in business."

## **LITTLE WONDER (SCHILLER-PFEIFFER, INC.)**

**David Navroth, Director of Sales**

**Hand-held/backpack products:** Walk-behind blowers, edgers, gas/electric hedge trimmers.

**Product design trends:** "Our high-output series blowers feature reduced dBA ratings but more air output over prior models. Our hand-held edgers have a two-cycle vs. a four-cycle engine. Our newest edger is powered by a 34cc two-cycle engine and is designed for less operator fatigue. In addition, fully enclosed blade guards keep debris directed toward the ground. Our hedge trimmers have reduced weight and increased blade speed."

**Safety/training:** "All Little Wonder equipment is submitted to multiple European safety standard companies for review. Our goal is to meet or surpass all European safety



Little Wonder's hedge trimmers feature reduced weight and increased blade speed.

standards (because in our opinion they are much tougher than the USA safety standards). We are also producing our owner's manuals in three different languages to improve operator knowledge."

**Purchasing/financing:** "It appears the current trend is professional landscapers purchasing their equipment on credit. There are many retail finance companies for the dealer to offer to his customer. In addition, Visa and MasterCard are accepted at all dealers and mass merchant locations. Even if a landscaper purchases his equipment at a mass merchant (i.e. Home Depot), the servicing dealer is there to service that equipment."

## **MARUYAMA**

**John Krueger, Marketing Manager**

**Hand-held/back products:** Blowers, brush cutters, edgers, hedge trimmers, sprayers and trimmers.

**Product design trends:** "The key issue today

and in the near future is EPA standards. Noise reduction is an issue in California, but in other parts of the country where noise really isn't an issue, contractors want bigger blowers and more power."

**Safety/training:** "We provide the information and hope it's being passed on to users. Safety goggles are important. Hedge trimmers can be especially dangerous if improperly used."

**Purchasing/financing:** "Price is an issue with consumers, but we market from the standpoint of, 'Pay a little bit more and get a much better commercial grade piece of equipment that will last more than one season with the proper care.'"

## **REDMAX**

**Tommy Tanaka, Engineer**

**Hand-held/backpack products:** Blowers, brush cutters, chain saws, edgers, hedge

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Circle 133

## TOOLS OF THE TRADE

*continued from page 67*

trimmers, power brooms, trimmers/edgers.

**Product design trends:** "All our products are designed with operator fatigue in mind. We want a balance of performance, weight, durability and price. Meeting the CARB emissions is also a major priority. For example, we've developed a clean air trimmer that meets CARB II and EPA standards without a catalytic converter but with a 25.4 cc, two-cycle Strato-Charged™ Air Head™ engine. Weighing 5% less, the engine uses 35% less fuel and reduces emissions by 73% over previous engines."

**Safety/training:** "We have safety gear that can only be purchased from a trained dealer who is required to explain how to use all of our equipment he sells. Our manuals are also thorough when it comes to explaining safety."

## STIHL

**Gary Hardee, National Sales Manager**

### Hand-held/backpack equipment:

Blowers, brush cutters, chain saws, edgers and pruners, along with a full line of handsheers, manual hedge trimmers, long-reach installing devices, trimmers and power brooms.

**Product design trends:** "Our blowers meet all noise regulations and emissions standards. Other design trends include chain saws equipped with a quick change ad-

juster that requires no tools and allows the user to keep the chains at the correct tension at all times, and those which feature a triple-activated chain break and low noise; brush cutters with anti-vibration handle bars; edgers with a straight shaft delivering 20% more power to the edger blade; power brooms with a drum width of 23 in. for a quality pass."

**Safety equipment:** "We offer a variety of protective and cut-resistant apparel including a nine-layer chap. We use a material called ENGTEX which is fibrous and can be machine washed without losing its protective coating capabilities. To get more landscapers to wear eye and ear protection, this equipment, we introduce a stylish pair of safety sun glasses every two years. Many landscapers don't like the helmet system, so we've developed a face/hearing protector that eliminates the need for a helmet and features a wire mesh screen face shield with ear muffs. OSHA is starting to effect this industry more, and many contractors are putting safety items on their bids for contracts."

## TANAKA

**Jeff Wright, President, North and South American operations**

### Hand-held/backpack products:

Trimmers, brush cutters, blowers, chain saws, portable and wheeled edgers, hedge trimmers and pruning saws.

**Product design trends:** "All man-



ufacturers of hand-held, two-cycle products must meet the stringent requirements regarding lower emission levels. Our 'PureFire' low emission, fuel saving engines were originally introduced in California to reduce emissions levels. We discovered that a by-product of the lower emission levels was lower fuel consumption. With current fuel costs at an all-time high, it's important that we reduce landscape contractors' and residential users' total operating costs by reducing their fuel costs."

**Training/safety:** "The most notable trend is the cohesive effort by manufacturers to create voluntary safety standards for their products. Additionally, manufacturers of premium equipment continue to solicit assistance from the servicing dealer in educating the consumer about product usage hazards and accident prevention. Lastly, the advent of the Internet is helping to educate consumers on proper product use."

**Purchasing/financing:** "The big box stores and mass merchants are selling high volumes of power equipment. But these facilities don't provide service for these products."



PHOTO COURTESY STIHL

When customers need service, they must take their product to a local servicing dealer. It's wrong to think that service isn't an issue! Service is a big concern, especially for the

landscape contractor. Downtime costs thousands of dollars in lost revenue."

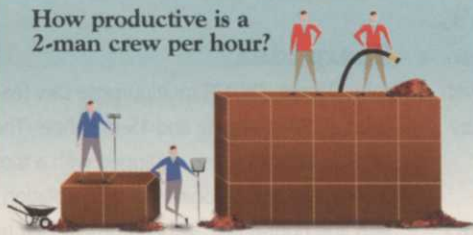


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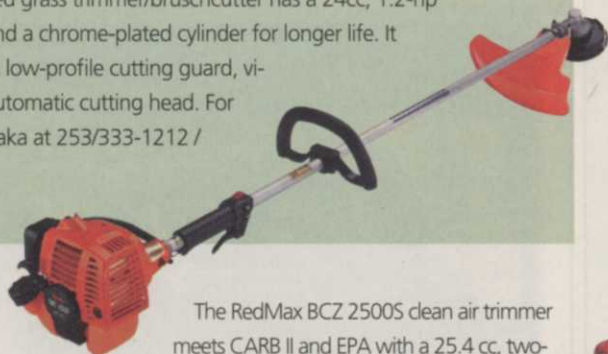
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# HAND-HELD & BACKPACKS 2001

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Tanaka's TBC-2501 steel-shafted grass trimmer/brushcutter has a 24cc, 1.2-hp engine with two piston rings and a chrome-plated cylinder for longer life. It weighs 11.4 lbs. and features a low-profile cutting guard, vibration system and 5-in. emi-automatic cutting head. For more information, contact Tanaka at 253/333-1212 / Circle no. 274



## Well blow me down

SOLO Inc.'s 470 gas-powered backpack blower meets Category I sound levels of the new ANSI standards — it operates at less than 65 decibels of sound at 50 feet from the operator. For more information contact SOLO Inc. at 516/868-6645 / Circle no. 275

## Edgin' along

Little Wonder's Xtra™ edger combines the maneuverability of a stick edger and the power of a wheeled edger. At 16 lbs., it's ideal for edging in confined spaces. Equipped with a cross-blade system, it can cut through thick overgrass and hard clay soil. For more information contact Mantis/Little Wonder at 505/822-8222 or [www.littlewonder.com](http://www.littlewonder.com) / Circle no. 276

## Spray it

Chapin Manufacturing, Inc.'s poly sprayer series features 4-1/2-in. wide openings; easy disconnect/safety lock for quick access for cleaning and repair; brass-plated zinc shut-off with lock-on for continuous spray; actual capacity tanks. Available in 1- to 3-gal. models. For more information contact Chapin at 716/3443-3140 or [www.chapinmfg.com](http://www.chapinmfg.com) / Circle no. 277

## Cleaner air

The RedMax BCZ 2500S clean air trimmer meets CARB II and EPA with a 25.4 cc, two-cycle Strato-Charged™ Air Head™ engine. Weighing 5% less, the engine uses 35% less fuel and reduces emissions by 73% over previous engines. For more information contact RedMax, a division of Komatsu Zenoah America, Inc., at 800/291-8251 or [www.redmax.com](http://www.redmax.com) / Circle no. 278

## Rev it up

Stihl's BR 420 backpack blower features a 36.5cc engine that delivers air speeds up to 180 mph. It features the Stihl IntelliCarb compensating carburetor, which allows long running times at full power without the need for frequent air filter cleanings. For more information contact Stihl at 800/467-8445 or [www.stihlusa.com](http://www.stihlusa.com) / Circle no. 279

## Sharp idea

John Deere's 880MS multipurpose saw features an 88 cc engine and 15-in. wheel. The 28.9-lb. 880MS is also equipped with a triple air filter system, six-point vibration isolation system and right-angle, semi-automatic belt tensioner. For more information contact John Deere at 800/537-8233 or [www.johndeere.com](http://www.johndeere.com) / Circle no. 280

## Take control

Husqvarna's 155BT backpack blower has a tube-mounted throttle for easy control that can be locked in any position. Its harness has two hip pads to take weight off the shoulders. Maximum air velocity is 183 mph, weight is 19.4 lbs. with 70dBA. For more information contact Husqvarna at 704/597-5000 / Circle no. 281

## Quiet and powerful

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## Trim or blow

LESCO Service Centers® and Stores on Wheels® offer a line of Kawasaki handheld power equipment which includes string trimmers with 23cc to 34cc engine units. Also included are backpack blowers with 48.6cc engines, handheld edgers (26 cc engine) and single or double blade hedge clippers. For more information contact LESCO at 800/833-6855 / Circle no. 282

