



# 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 light-weights. 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 foreman 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 lawn care, 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."



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