



SMOOTH RUNNING

BY VICKY POULSEN

▲ PHOTO COURTESY GROUNDMASTERS, INC.

Three seasoned landscape contractors talk about how they use equipment maintenance products to keep their operations running smoothly

Landscape operations wouldn't be complete without today's selection of maintenance products required to keep their equipment running.

Popular shelf items include oil, filters, grease, replacement blades, blade sharpeners, belts, hoses and light bulbs — just to name a few.

Many contractors stick with one brand or manufacturer when purchasing various categories of equipment to make their inventories and part replacements simpler. They

also troubleshoot problems early and call for outside technical assistance when needed.

On a scale of one to 10, contractors give preventative maintenance a 10 when it comes to keeping equipment costs down and service hours up. But they also know when it's time to give up that beloved walk-behind or trimmer.

We decided to ask three readers to give us their views on their own personal maintenance programs. Here is what they had to say:

continued next page

LARGE CONTRACTOR

Name: Mike Rorie
Title: President/Owner
Company: Groundmasters, Inc.
Location: Cincinnati, OH
2000 revenues: \$9 million
Business mix: 100% commercial
Employees: 125
Company profile: Began business in 1979, servicing primarily residential accounts. By 1982, Rorie's vision was to create a large equipment-intensive business, so the commercial market became



the focal point of his operation. Today, his company is completely devoted to commercial accounts, catering to more than 500 sites.

Maintenance services make up the lion's share of the contract work. The business grew throughout the '80s to about \$1 million in revenue. In the '90s, Rorie added a facility in Cincinnati, Dayton and northern

Kentucky. Today, the company employs 125 people, and revenues topped \$9 million in 2000.

Equipment arsenal: Over 80 trucks, 30-plus trailers and over 400 pieces of additional equipment — everything from tractors to weed eaters.

Maintenance plan: An in-house, five-member fleet department at each branch managed by a fleet manager. "We do all our own preventative maintenance — whether it's a skid loader or a lawnmower." Maintenance/repair work is done the quarter of the year prior to the quarter of production — lawnmowers are fixed in the winter and snowplows in August. The fleet manager determines the standards the company follows when servicing a piece of equipment. "We don't want to underservice or overservice." Will send out the occasional engine overhaul or transmission repair work to an outside mechanic.

Maintenance budget (labor and parts): About 2% of total revenue. Company tries to determine the operation costs of a piece of equipment when developing a preventative maintenance budget. "Contractors need to track equipment just like job costs. We put hour meters on everything. It's the easiest way to track usage and determine preventative maintenance."

An inside job: "Hiring a mechanic will depend on the money you've invested in equipment and the money and time involved in going back and forth to get repairs done on the outside. You'll want someone who is readying the equipment as well as repairing and servicing it."

Parts inventory: Company stocks all the routine parts such as belts, hoses, filters, coils, hydraulic fluids, light bulbs, wipers and tires. All of these parts are part of its preventative maintenance checks. "If we need a new alternator or water pump, we'll access that part through one of our

MEDIUM CONTRACTOR

Name: Kris Hjort
Title: President/Owner
Company: K & H Lawn Services, Inc.
Location: Fairfax, VA
2000 revenues: \$1.8 million
Business mix: 80% residential, 20% commercial
Employees: 10 full-time
Company profile: Started business in 1984. About 55% of services are devoted to maintenance, 30% to design and installation, 14% to turf and ornamental and 1% to snow removal.

Equipment arsenal: Three pick-up trucks and four stake body trucks. Four of company's five vans are Super Lawn trucks.

Other equipment includes 20 backpack blowers, 20 trimmers, seven stick edgers and an array of walk-behind mowers and riders.



Maintenance plan: Company performs minor maintenance such as oil changes on their trucks. Greasing and blade sharpening on other pieces of equipment are performed on a daily basis. Major repairs are sent to an outside mechanic.

Maintenance budget (parts and labor): About 2% of total revenue.

An inside job: Currently uses an outside

mechanic, but company is looking to hire its own part-time mechanic for equipment repair and maintenance work.

Parts inventory: "We used to stock a fair amount of parts but found that it was a waste. Now we only stock oil, grease, mowing blades, maybe one round of oil and air filters and anything that we must have on hand at all times. Replacement parts are purchased from our mechanic. We also try to stick with the same brand whether it's a blower or trimmer."

Cleaning/painting: "We have a hard time doing painting and cleaning because we don't have great access to water to wash equipment and trucks. Still, we try to

2005



local suppliers. We buy multiples of a particular brand. For example, we buy the same brand for our walk-behinds, and so on. This is so we can stock a modest amount of inventory that will fit every piece in a particular equipment category."

Cleaning/painting: Cleaning is done in-house on a routine basis. Extensive cleaning, including steam cleaning engines and waxing, is done annually and sometimes bi-annually. Touch-up painting on trailers, mowers, pumps and sprayers is done in the winter months. Complete paint jobs are left to an outside paint specialist.

Equipment life: "Trucks and trailers are rotated between a 7- to 10-year period due to the

wash trucks and equipment on a weekly basis. We do very little if any repainting of equipment."

Equipment life: "We're a little excessive when it comes to equipment — we don't want to go without. We'll try to allocate three spring trimmers to each of our two-men crews so they have a spare if one piece of equipment breaks down. Smaller pieces of equipment last between two and three years, while mowers can last as long as 10 years. We try to

low mileage we put on them, while smaller pieces of equipment are replaced every two to three years. We used to keep these smaller pieces of equipment twice as long, but it backed up our shops. Plus, we found it cost us more money to upkeep a piece of used equipment. If we sold this piece of equipment at the optimum time, we could get 50 cents on the dollar that could be used towards the purchase of new equipment. Plus, we could take advantage of technological advances much sooner."

Equipment afterlife: "We'll occasionally go through auctions, but typically advertise and sell to a dealer. There's a large audience of small contractors that will take advantage of the price break."

keep trucks as long as possible — the first truck I ever bought died in the fall of last year at 18 years old."

Equipment afterlife: "Once we're through with a piece of equipment, we'll often give it to charity. If we're still using that brand, we'll take the parts that are useful and keep them. If not, it'll go to the junkyard."

SMALL COMPANY

Name: Greg Bechtold
Title: Co-owner with wife, Andee
Company: Longhorn Maintenance, Inc.
Location: McKinney, TX
2000 revenues: \$1.4 million
Business mix: 75% commercial, 25% residential
Employees: 15
Company profile: Entering their 20th year, Longhorn Maintenance, Inc. considers itself a "three-year-old company with 20 years of experience." Three years ago, Longhorn joined ALCA, immediately implementing all of the information it gained from the association. That information helped it increase its gross revenues from \$500,000 in 1997 (with zero profit) to \$1.4 million in 2000.

Equipment arsenal: 21- to 48-in. walk-behind mowers, ZTR mowers, ASV/Dingo, trailers, dump trailers, trucks, and hand tools and back-pack equipment.

Maintenance plan: Company does its own maintenance work such as filter/oil changes and blade sharpening. Anything beyond minor repairs such as carburetor or transmission problems are sent to an outside mechanic.

Maintenance budget (labor and parts): About 2% of company's entire revenue.

An inside job: Will be hiring a full-time shop person.

Parts inventory: Company stocks everything needed for routine maintenance: oil, air filters, blades, spark plugs, belts, nuts and bolts, and weed-eater heads. "Whenever we use a part, we put it on our inventory list right away. Because of that, those parts are constantly replaced, and we don't get behind." They keep each piece of equipment within the same brand to make parts needs simpler.

Cleaning/painting: Cleaning is done weekly, and minor painting such as freshening up a deck is done as needed.

Equipment life: Their trucks last 10 years. "We stay within a very small radius, so our trucks don't travel great distances." Larger mowers last three to four years, while excavation and mini-loaders last up to five years. Hand-held and light equipment lasts one or two seasons. "We have hour meters on larger pieces of equipment, but we won't dump a piece of equipment just because it has logged a lot of hours. If it's cutting service and requiring more repair, though, it gets dumped."

Equipment afterlife: "We sell most of it to a local dealer and retain the best used equipment for our backups."

EQUIPMENT MAINTENANCE 2001

A real seal

Safety Tire Seal Corporation offers the Safety Seal, a self-vulcanizing external repair kit that needs no cement or vulcanizing fluids to make a permanent repair to tubeless tires used on turf equipment such as mowers, skid-steers, tractors, irrigation equipment, trenchers and bucket loaders, as well as cars, vans, trucks, trailers, pickups and SUVs. Get Safety Seal in its new molded, weather-resistant plastic case with enough material to make 30 repairs. For more information contact Safety Tire Seal Corp. at 800/233-8473 / Circle no. 282



Chain gang

Husqvarna's clamshell packaging for chains as well as bar and chain combinations allows retailer and consumers to match their needs with their specific product at a glance. Listed on the packaging are easy-to-read "fit-up" specs matching Oregon chains to Husqvarna chain saws. Chains come in both single and double packages. Bar and chain combinations are single-packed. For more

information contact Husqvarna at 800/438-7297 or www.husqvarna.com / Circle no. 286

Drip drip

National Spencer Inc.'s new non-drip nozzles offer a new way to track different fluids and offer automatic closure to reduce leakage. They are color-coded, and fully compatible with the entire line of Zeeline lubrication equipment. For more information contact National Spencer at 316/265-5601 or www.zeeline.com / Circle no. 287

Paint job

Morgan Corporation has a new custom spray paint for repair jobs and touch-up applications. The paint is an exact match for OEM paint used on Morgan truck bodies. An over spray leveler is used as a finish product to smooth and even out paint applications. For more information contact Morgan at 888/545-7278 / Circle no. 288

Mower parts

Stens Power Equipment Parts, a subsidiary of Ariens Co., has a 2001 catalog out that features a large selection of drive, rider and pushmower parts. Included are replacement universal throttle controls, shift and clutch cables for Honda, starter solenoids for Ariens, rear end overhaul kit for Snapper and more. For more information contact Stens at 800/457-7444 / Circle no. 289

Motoring along

Briggs & Stratton's new Etek electric motor system, a combination DC motor and electronic controller, is designed to power golf cars and other electric-power utility vehicles. The motor is 50% smaller and over 20 lbs. lighter than others, resulting in an efficient combination of power and torque. For more information log on to www.briggsandstratton.com / Circle no. 290

Clean engines

Kohler's air cleaners for Command and Command Pro 18- to 25-hp engines are lightweight, compact and easy to install. A swirl design collects/ejects trapped dust. The main filter has 1,398 sq. ft. of effective area. An eight micron inner filter protects carburetor. For more information contact Kohler at 800/544-2444 or www.kohlerengines.com / Circle no. 291

Chock full o' parts

Industrial Specialties Manufacturing Inc.'s new 230-page catalog describes its selection of fittings, tubing, mufflers, manifolds, valves, filters and accessories in a range of sizes. Products are available in materials such as brass, stainless steel and numerous plastic formulations. A full line of plastic tubing is also described, and includes a chemical compatibility chart and an engineering data section. For more information contact Industrial Specialties Mfg. at 303/781-8486 or www.industrialspec.com / Circle no. 283

\$599 to \$1,469. Air compressors are manufactured with long-life cast iron sleeve pumps as well as Honda engines. For more information contact Northern Tool and Equipment Co. at 800/556-7885 or www.NorthernTool.com / Circle no. 284

Back to the grind

Bernhard and Company's RotaMaster blade grinder features an automatic infeed with auto cut-off which can be left to complete the grinding cycle alone. Features include a quality balancer and automatic traverse with easily adjusted travel stops. With blades held securely in place, both ends can be ground at the same time. The blade grinder is encased and the grinding operation occurs away from the operator. Dust can be vacuumed away using the machine's attachment. For more information contact Bernhard at 888/474-6348 / Circle no. 285

Air apparent

Northern Tool and Equipment Co.'s new line of professional grade NorthStar air compressors include three gas units as well as two electric models ranging in price from

