



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."