

# Got it, Use it

BY VICKY POULSEN

## Three landscape contractors discuss getting the most out of construction and installation equipment

**E**very landscape contractor knows that if his equipment "ain't workin', it ain't makin' money." That's why they look for equipment that's versatile enough to handle many tasks and productive enough to pay for itself in a short time.

Equipment with those qualities does exist in this industry, as you can learn by reading what the manufacturers have to say and reviewing the latest products in the pages that follow. First, read about what types of construction and installation equipment work best for three contractors we interviewed.

▲ PHOTO COURTESY TORO

### LARGE CONTRACTOR

**Name:** Frank Mariani

**Title:** President

**Company:** Mariani Landscape

**Location:** Lake Bluff, IL

**2000 revenues:** \$23 million

**Business mix:** 97% commercial

**Employees:** 320

**Company profile:** Founded by Vito Mariani, Sr. in 1958, the company also has a satellite office in Bollingbrook, IL, to service the western suburbs. Located in Lake Bluff is its design/build and landscape management maintenance divisions hailed as its top two "profit centers." Both departments are operated with their own staffs. Maintenance crew sizes range from two and five people and construction crews may need between four or five, depending on the job. Crews may even be combined since construction projects can range from \$2,000 to \$2 million per job.

**Construction/installation equipment:** "We have close to 100 trucks. For safety rea-

sons, we decided eight years ago that any truck we purchased would have a crew cab and four doors. All our trucks are equipped with an enclosed trailer and outfitted with every piece of equipment necessary for a job. All equipment is turned in twice a week for maintenance. We have five full-time mechanics on staff. Our loading crews pull up to a marked spot near our garage where our trailers are undone and add a new set of equipment. We pattern our maintenance.

program after UPS's preventive maintenance program. We run a 4900 series International four-door dump truck equipped with a 12-ft. contractor's box and a side lift gate that can lift almost 3,000 lbs. We like our Case skid steers because we do a lot of high-end residential work that requires a greater lifting capacity. We've also had one of our semi-tractors custom built with a heavy laid-up crane."

**Best features:** "Our dump truck

lets us load and unload plant material without damaging any of the plants. Also, the lift gates on our construction trucks save us a lot of time and labor."

**Making a profit:** "In our industry, it's important to follow a schedule where your crew is at the job on time. We pride ourselves in handling unapplied labor or labor that can't be billed to a job. We also have all our materials direct-shipped to the site."

**Purchase method:** "We have our own leasing company."

**Equipment needs:** "This year, we added seven maintenance crews, which means seven more vehicles, seven more trailers and all the equipment that makes up a maintenance crew. We also retire about 10% of our equipment a year to keep our stock fresh. Every 10 years, we have a new equipment base. We're buying based on need, and can identify that need far enough in advance."

**Dream machine:** "We would

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love a skid steer that was a little more compact but with the lifting capacity of a larger machine. I don't know if that's possible."

### MEDIUM CONTRACTOR

**Name:** Billy Gray

**Title:** General Manager and partner

**Company:** The Southern Landscape Group

**Location:** Pinehurst, N.C.

**2000 revenues:** \$1.4 million

**Business mix:** 81% residential

**Employees:** 23

**Company profile:** Company started in April 1999. Landscape construction encompasses 68% of business, while the rest is maintenance. Crews usually consist of two people but, for construction, the crew size can vary from two to five. Each crew is headed by a supervisor.

**Construction/installation equipment:**

Dump trucks, dedicated spray vehicles, pickup trucks, a van dedicated for irrigation purposes, Bobcat 763 and a Toro Dingo, both with various attachments, New Holland and Mustang skid steer loaders, Ditch Witch trencher, and the King Of Spades, one of Gray's favorite tools.

**Best features:** "We like to use equipment that can perform many tasks. With the Dingo and Bobcat, you can switch out of various attachments. We also try to keep



all our attachments centralized on a trailer with the Dingo and the Bobcat. We'll pull the trailer to the job site and hook from one attachment to another. The same goes for the Bobcat. We like to take our loaders into small areas without disturbing the existing soil."

**Making a profit:** "We purchase all multi-function equipment that's easy to operate and efficient. Our employees are more productive and the morale is high because they are less tired at day's end."

**Purchase method:** "Always buy new."

**Equipment needs:** "We believe in preventive maintenance and regular cleaning of our equipment and vehicles. For bigger repairs, we take our vehicles to one centrally located outside mechanic. We have all vehicles professionally cleaned bi-weekly because our company is big on image. New purchases depend on what our needs will be for the following year."

**Dream machine:** "A small loader that can pick up heavier material and move a substantial amount of weight."

### SMALL CONTRACTOR

**Name:** Richard and Ann Marie Breimann

**Title(s):** Co-owners

**Company:** Breimann's Landscaping, Inc.

**Location:** Allentown, NJ

**2000 revenue:** \$350,000

**Business mix:** 75% residential

**Employees:** 8

**Company profile:** Founded in 1986, the company provides a 50/50 mix of landscape and maintenance services performed, mostly, by three-man crews.



**Equipment:** A dump truck with an aluminum bed, Kubota tractor/front-end loader, a roto-tiller, a bed edger, several barrels and shovels.

**Best features:** "The tractor has helped with loading topsoil and mulch. The new bed edger lets us prep beds in 15 minutes. The roto-tiller has also helped us get through some of the heavier clay soils."

**Making a profit:** "It's important to order your materials ahead of time. I personally pick up our plant materials from the nursery before heading to a job, and I always make sure we're getting a good price."

**Finance method:** "We initially lease, then purchase later."

**Equipment needs:** "We usually base any purchases on the contracts we currently have. We plan to offer irrigation services, which means we'll need to invest in a trencher and other pieces of equipment. We'd also like to get a sod cutter."

**Dream machine:** "A Finn mulch blower. It would free me up and maybe allow me to stretch the season by subcontracting it out to other companies."