

Tough little brutes



A variety of attachments allow this Toro Dingo power unit to tackle multiple landscaping tasks.

Compact skid-steer and utility track loaders give landscapers small but powerful tools to reduce labor costs

BY STEVEN GREENWALD

Compact skid-steer loaders and utility track loaders are the newest products on landscape contractors' wish lists. "They were going crazy for these in Las Vegas at Con Expo," says

Brad Lemke, new product development manager for ASV, Grand Rapids, MN.

And it's no wonder. The newer mini-machines can deliver what the larger ones can but at a lower cost and with only half the size and weight, making them ideal for working in tight spaces, often without disrupting turfgrass or surrounding landscapes.

"As the size-to-power ratio improves, the basic market trend in installation products will go toward more compact, more powerful products," says Alan Porter, president of Kanga Loaders, Broken Arrow, OK. "Some of these new products have a footprint the size of a wheelbarrow."

What's the appeal for landscape professionals? First of all, the smaller machines are maneuverable enough to work in

tighter areas, for creating new installations; for renovating terrain that's already been developed and for maintenance work. They can fit between buildings, existing landscaping and hardscaping, even through fence gates without the bother of the operator having to remove sections. They can also turn in a smaller radius.

Turf & landscape friendly

"They give performance with the least disturbance to the property," says Tom Sieper, product manager, Kubota Tractor Corporation, Torrance, CA.

As a category, the smaller units are light in weight, so they exert far less pressure on the ground than the older products and do far less damage to the surface. Look for psi ratings when acquiring one, say the experts.

Exerting far less pressure is especially true with the tracked implements. "Track loaders are soft on the ground, with many actually lighter in psi than a human footprint," says Tony Wixso, product manager

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for Polaris, Median, MN. "And they don't skid, so they don't rip up the turf."

"The track systems on utility loaders, with their lower psi, are less likely to leave ruts in developed areas, and they can turn without tearing the turf," agrees Lynn Roesler, loader products marketing manager, Bobcat Company, West Fargo, ND. Their combined delicacy and toughness make them popular for sensitive areas such as golf courses, says ASV's Lemke.

According to Marc Bowers, marketing manager, Sitework Systems, The Toro Company, Bloomington, MN, the com-



Lynn Roesler says part of compacts' appeal is their ease of use.

pacts "are like a paring knife. They do a precision job, the job they're designed for." The operator can see what's going on, he says, which is crucial in maintenance and renovation work where "landscapers need to see precisely what they're doing."

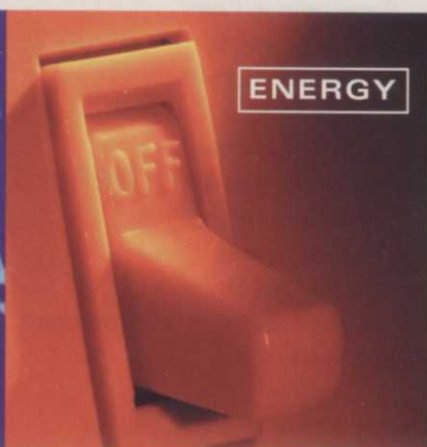
Light weight and small size also translate to portability. The new compacts "are easy to move, with no logistical problems," says Mike McPherson, vice president, Glenmac, Inc., Jamestown, ND. "You can move them to a site in a custom trailer with room for all the attachments," he says, so you can work rather than locate the right equipment or find a rental.

And they don't even need a custom trailer. "The new compacts are under 10,000 lbs., says Kubota's Sieper. "They can be hauled in a 1/2-ton pickup, so light the driver doesn't need a commercial driver's license to haul them around to your worksites."

Less stress

The minimal weight and the track design of compact utility loaders also means they have the traction needed for wet days or on muddy ground, according to Roger Braswell, president, PowerHouse Equipment Inc., Fort Mill, SC.

"You can get out and do the job with less downtime," adds Lemke. "And because you can get work done when the rain is wet, you save on costs and labor."



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Ease of use is touted as a major advantage of the compact installation machine. "They're easy to use and not intimidating," says Bobcat's Roesler.

This appeals to operators, says Wixo. "There are those that work with joysticks, with a thumb-operated hydraulic, and no foot operation. It gives the video game expert an advantage in the workplace."

And their lower center of gravity gives them more stability for more safety.

According to Toro's Bowers, "They aren't only easy to learn to use, they're easy to learn to use safely. Safety is the key. A



Marc Bowers: "Compact utility loaders are like Swiss army knives."

worker can be fully productive in minutes, so the customer doesn't have to see the worker learning on his own turf and on his own time. Instead, he sees proficiency."

New suspension systems, such as the one offered by his company,

give the operator a smoother ride with less fatigue, says ASV's Lemke.

This ease-of-use also translates to ease in changing attachments, according to Kubota's Sieper. These compact products come with many attachments, and they can be added quickly, often by hand without tools, to maximize the machine's productivity.

Versatility rules

A range of attachments makes the compacts stand out. For instance, "compact utility loaders are like Swiss army knives," says Bowers. "They are flexible enough to meet very specific needs. They do a focused job that is specific to that installation. It's a tool-box solution."

"The minis are actually power plants," adds Glenmac's McPherson. "The attach-

ment drivers are almost like generators, with the power of a big machine, but the tenderness and maneuverability of a small one."

"They have good hydraulics, so they have excellent attachment capability," adds Roesler. He touts the more popular ones: tillers, trenchers for irrigation work, and augers for fences and trees. "They let one machine do a lot of different jobs," he says. "It's not like buying a tree spade or post hole digger."

Other attachments include brooms, pallet forks, buckets, and sod rollers, all easy to attach and detach. And there's a general drift to adding more attachments. Braswell notes such things as stump grinders, vibratory plows, and trench improvements.

"One machine can take the place of a dozen others," agrees Lemke, "so you save on equipment cost."

Sieper concurs. Compacts are being used by those who need a lot of bang for the buck, he says, like municipalities with limited budgets and a lot of different needs. And rental companies find that the versatility of compacts will maximize their investment in these assets.

Cost and labor savings

Cost is one of the major factors behind compacts' popularity. First of all, the compacts just cost less to buy than the bigger units, says Dan Kilgas, marketing category manager at Ariens, Brillion, WI. Kubota's Sieper calls them "pocketbook friendly."

Porter adds that compacts are also cheaper to operate and reliable. Kanga's customer feedback has shown that the buyer can recoup the purchase cost well within a year. "All the attachments mean you can do a wide range of jobs, eliminating all hand labor, and you become very efficient in terms of cost," he says.



Customers like compacts' low cost, says Dan Kilgas.

Compacts can replace the manual labor of two or three people, so the job gets done fast, and their versatility lets operators save time by making secondary or tertiary operations easy to do.

"Our customers say you can reduce

your exposure time on a contract site and get a job done with 30% to 50% time savings," says Porter. "So you start your next job sooner and pack in more jobs a year."

This means, says Bowers, that a landscape pro can bid a job based on hand

labor costs and still get the contract, but he can then show up with a compact and get the job done in half the time.

"The test of these products is their productivity," he says, and that makes them popular. "I

know contractors whose crews get to work early so they can get the compact equipment they want."

Cost is one of the major factors behind compacts' popularity.

More creativity, more business

Ultimately, compacts can have an effect on the bottom line most contractors can't foresee. "They're versatile," says Porter. "You can intensify the scope of what you're doing and create more dramatic effects."

Landscape pros can also take advantage of extra attachments by adding services such as snow removal with snow blowers and plow blades. "You use your investment year-round that way," says Wixo, "and that makes sense from a business standpoint."

— *The author is a freelance writer who lives and works in Cleveland, OH.*