



Front runners

Out-front riding mowers are rugged, detail-oriented and attachment friendly.

BY KAY OHLY

Need a workhorse that can glide over rough patches and mow into ditches? How about a machine configured to handle attachments of all sorts, a go-to for large jobs and detail-oriented properties with trimming requirements?

Look out front for the solution.

Front-cut riding mowers, also called out-front riders, consume a modest percentage of the mower market. But sales in this sector climbed while other categories slipped in the beginning of 2007, according to the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute (OPEI). Mark Naperala, director of marketing for Ariens Co. in Brillion, WI, says more landscape contractors are warming up to this option. "The market has grown because other manufacturers have entered it," he says, adding that OPEI statistics do not report sales from one major front-cut supplier,

so "the true number of units entering the market is hard to tell."

But industry trends give landscape contractors reason to consider these hearty machines. As municipalities and schools outsource landscape services, contractors who win these jobs need heavier-duty equipment.

"Out-front riders can perform production-type mowing better than a ZTR can," says Gilbert Pena, commercial segment strategy manager, John Deere, Cary, NC. "Say a landscaper gets a three- to five-year contract with a municipality. They would be better off investing in an out-front rider vs. a ZTR."

Besides, front-cut mowers can accommodate a collection of attachments, manage large mowing jobs and handle slopes and rough terrain with ease. "The front-cut deserves a bigger share of the market than it is currently enjoying," remarks Bob Walker, president of Fort Collins, CO-based Walker Mowers. In many respects, education is the missing piece to this configuration's market share.

Technically speaking

The out-front configuration resembles a rearranged zero-turn unit. Rather than stacking the deck and tractor like a mid-mount zero, out-fronts divide the machine into a tractor unit and the deck.

"The cutting part is lightly loaded, so it can float," Walker describes, noting that cutting deck sizes range from 36 to 74 inches.

Operators can enjoy the maneuverability of a zero-turn along with out-front deck advantages, including better traction on slopes, a smoother ride on rough terrain and versatility with an array of attachments. Also, landscape contractors whose jobsites require tedious trimming can knock out this task with one pass of an out-front rider.

"The operator sits at the actual pivot point of the mower, so turning and maneuvering occurs almost as an extension of the operator's body," describes R. A. Stucky, marketing director for The Grasshopper Co., Moundridge, KS.

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Cut for quality

Productivity drives the buying decision for most landscapers, but how long does it take to mow and complete finishing work? In other words, if the cut takes 15 minutes, will the contractor spend another half hour going back over the property with a string trimmer to access hard-to-reach areas? Champions of the front-cut configuration rally by its ability to deliver a quality cut in a single pass.

The front-cutting deck sits on a different mounting system than the tractor body of the mower. Therefore, the cutting component can move independently to work into the nooks and crannies of a landscape, such as ditches, slopes, under brush and

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A fit for the job

Not sure whether a front-cut configuration is the right fit for your fleet? First consider your job requirements. Following are scenarios where out-front riders excel in performance:

Trimming work – The front-mounted deck is an ideal trimming platform, and the mower can skim right alongside sidewalks, plant beds and other borders.

Wide, open spaces – Larger deck sizes, ranging from 58 to 72 in. and beyond, are suitable for municipal, school and expansive commercial jobs.

Snow jobs – Attach snow removal equipment to manage winter jobs, parking lot cleanup, etc. Just be sure to purchase enough horsepower. Twenty-five to 31 hp is suitable.

Rough terrain – The longer length of front-cut mowers distributes weight more evenly and helps absorb vibration caused by rugged terrain.

Ditches and slopes – Because the deck conforms to the ground, and can move independently of the power unit, out-front riders can ease into ditches and have a four-wheel drive traction advantage on slopes.

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Out-front mowers allow multiple attachments.

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next to fences and other barriers. This translates to less scalping on rough terrain, and cleaner cutting in tight spaces.

"For quality cutting, there is a noticeable improvement in the appearance of the cut you can get with a front-mount mower, and this is because of the way the deck is suspended," Walker says.

Also, 4-wheel drive provides greater traction, and therefore more safety, on slopes. "The longer [mower] length distributes weight more evenly and helps absorb vibration caused by rugged terrain," Stucky says, which means a smoother ride and a lighter footprint on turf.

Multi-task machine

If a job calls for more than just mowing, a front-cut configuration can serve as a single-



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machine solution, Stucky adds. "Managers who are responsible for complete grounds care can optimize their budgets by employing front-cut power units for leaf pickup, sweeping, backfilling, snow removal, edging, aeration and spraying," he says.

Walker Mowers are famous for their grass collection systems. Because the attachment is designed for the front-cut machine, it does not upset the balance of the mower, Walker says. Imagine a banker's scale: one side loaded with the cutting deck, the other side with the attachment. On a mid-mount mower, iron isn't evenly distributed when you add attachments. These machines require counterweights.

"If you have an easy-on, easy-off mower deck, then you can take the deck off in the fall and attach a leaf blower," Pena notes. "Once fall has passed, you take off the blower and attach a snow blower or blade. You can also opt for a rotary broom to sweep parking lots." **LM**

— The author is a Cleveland-based freelance writer.

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