

► A skid steer with a grapple attachment carries away a downed tree.



Steer clear of trouble

It's not easy being clean – on the job site that is. Landscapers are often given tight spaces and time frames in which to get their work done.

Whether it's selective thinning and beautification for a private landowner, trail development and maintenance for park projects, or clear-cutting for a commercial endeavor, skid steers can help finish a project quickly, efficiently and with minimal surface disruption.

Trees Unlimited in suburban Chicago, for example, employs a number of skid steers and attachments to achieve a common land clearing goal.

Skid steer attachments boost productivity and minimize site damage

Owner Curt Pfaffinger purchased a Bull Hog mulching head, a shear and a grapple, which gave his company the opportunity to do more work for park and conservation districts. Those particular customers were looking for selective thinning, so the highly maneuverable skid steers were a perfect fit.

"They want to make trails

without taking much down. Everyone wants to save a tree," says Pfaffinger. "With the Bull Hog we can do that work. We get around the big oak tree but we don't destroy anything that you don't want to."

The low ground pressure imparted by skid steers was another big selling point for the municipal work. Trees Unlimited uses a rubber-tracked Cat

287 and a John Deere 280.

"There is no compaction," Pfaffinger says. "We don't hurt the root structure so the keeper trees continue to grow and develop."

The maneuverability of the skid steers enhances efficiency with commercial projects where all of the vegetation must be removed. Pfaffinger

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uses a skid steer with a Bull Hog mulcher head to clear away the undergrowth before bringing in skid steers with shears, grapples, saws and other equipment to clear away larger diameter materials.

"We'll go in with a Fecon head first and get rid of all of the minus 4-inch material. That gives us room to maneuver around without brambles and thorns grabbing at the operators," Pfaffinger says. "The Fecon head goes in the day beforehand, mows it all off and gives the other guys room to work."

Often landscapers use grapples, tree saws and bunching shears to fell larger diameter trees before hauling them to a chipping location.

"We've got a 2000 Vermeer with auto-feed, which we feed with a Bobcat," Pfaffinger says. "One guy just feeds the grinder and two guys bring the material to him. He doesn't have to waste time schlepping logs."

Sticking to their specialized roles has helped increase productivity, both individually and for the crews as a whole. But that's not to say that operators never switch attachments.

"We're using all implements on any given job. We flip flop all the time, because the time to change from one to another is minimal," Pfaffinger says.

Depending upon the terrain and site conditions, operators may start using the tree



▲ A grapple attachment helps turn trees into mulch.

saw to fell large diameter trees and then switch to the bunching shear for more control.

"Both will handle the same diameter materials – about 16 inches – but the shear gives us more control since we're still holding onto the tree after it has been sheared," Pfaffinger says.

That's important in tight working areas, especially residential or where there are other crew members working in the vicinity.

Pfaffinger brings more equipment than he plans on using, so, in case of a breakdown, the project can continue. If the project calls for removal of the mulched material, then Trees Unlimited blows the chips into one of the

company's fleet of chip trucks.

"We've got 6-wheelers with a box on the back, and a box inverted on top" Pfaffinger says, "so we can handle 20 yards of chips at a time."

Someone takes the chips to the company's gravel pit and runs them through a tub grinder to produce mulch, which is then sold or used on internal projects. As the land clearing business expands, so does the mulch production. Pfaffinger produced 20,000 yards of mulch last year – up from 12,000 the previous year.

But not everything that his crews touch turns into "black gold." Sometimes they'll mulch the materials with a Bull Hog mulcher head, and then leave them onsite, which helps to control erosion. As the mulched materials decompose, they return nutri-

ents to the soil. Mulching and leaving the material on site is operationally easier and eliminates the hauling of chips and further processing at the gravel pit.

Whether they are removing the materials, or leaving them to Mother Nature, Pfaffinger wants his crews to get in, complete the project and move on to the next one. Or as he says — "Get in, get done and get on." His variety of attachments and capabilities allows Trees Unlimited to do just that. Pfaffinger estimates that they've completed projects as small as a single-tree removal to 12 to 15 acres.

"It is nothing for us to clear two or three acres a day," Pfaffinger says

That is a testament to the crews and the productivity of their attachments. **LM**