



Combination machines like the Rapid M with the Gravely Car Pusher can pay off if you have the market for the services.

ORDER THE COMBO PLATTER

Multipurpose equipment can be a worthwhile investment for many reasons, not the least of which is service flexibility. **BY CURT HARLER**

THE COMBINATION PLATE at a Chinese restaurant or fish house is usually the best deal. You get a meal that offers several tasty treats. Combination equipment works much in the same way: For one price you get a product offering at least a couple of functions.

“For the typical landscape professional, a machine built to handle a variety of attachments is going to deliver a better return on investment

than a single-purpose machine,” says Roger Gifford, Cub Cadet Yanmar’s compact product manager, adding it gives a landscaper the ability to adapt to the challenges of each job.

“It also provides flexibility in terms of the types of jobs a landscaper can take on, which is important for capitalizing on a continually changing market,” Gifford says.

“By investing in multi-purpose equipment, you save money by lowering your initial investment, buying one piece of equipment versus multiple machines,” says Tim Mercer, value stream director of turf products and Auburn operations for Ariens in Auburn, NE.

Dan Paschke, product manager for John Deere’s compact utility tractor line, agrees, saying it comes down to capital and what you have available to do the job.

Will it pay to go big?

Paschke says the smaller company with a couple of guys on the road is likely to benefit from a combination



A combination machine is ideal for the occasional call for stump removal. When the job is done, reattach the bucket.

machine. Those few workers will get to a jobsite and have to do everything. One machine with several functions will let them accomplish that goal.

"A compact utility tractor with a loader on front and backhoe on back will do the same jobs as a miniexcavator and skid steer," Paschke says. "It's not as efficient, but it will do the job for less money."

If your business is in the fortunate position of taking on new, larger contracts, you're likely pondering whether it will pay to step up to a compact tractor versus adding attachments to a commercial mower. This depends on the scope of the business.

"If your business is primarily cutting and maintenance, you're better to stick with a well-built commercial mower," Gifford advises. "But if you want to pursue new opportunities and growth by expanding your capabilities, you need one piece of equipment you can bill out to more avenues, like a versatile compact tractor and attachments."

As with any significant business decision, purchasing a compact and attachments should involve a thorough financial analysis.

In a shop, multipurpose equipment typically takes up less floor space than several single purpose machines, Mercer says.

"You have less maintenance, parts and upkeep for multiuse equipment," he says.

In addition, multiuse equipment is easier to upgrade. You buy it as you can afford the outlay or your business opportunities grow. Plus, it gives you the opportunity to capitalize on multiple-season use for increased revenue. For example, Gravely's Rapid M two-wheel tractor with attachments includes a 30-in. deck, a 32-in. snow blower, a 44-in. brush, a 48-in. blade and a new car pusher.

"The various attachments allow it to be used in all seasons," Mercer says. "And, trade-in value is typically higher for equipment with accessories."

KEEP YOUR SEAT TO KEEP IT SAFE

With attachments coming on and off regularly, operator safety is always a concern to effective operation.

"The key to safety is putting yourself in the safest place possible when changing attachments," says Dan Paschke, product manager for John Deere's compact utility tractor line. "In most cases, that means in the driver's seat and not between the tractor and mower or loader."

Most manufacturers have systems that allow the operator to connect a mower, loader or backhoe from the seat. John Deere's iMatch AutoHitch combination is one such coupling system that allows landscapers to attach rear-mounted, power take-off driven implements without getting out of the seat. The patent-pending system requires no tools to attach implements after initial installation is complete. — CH

Landscapers are well advised to purchase combination products as a package from their dealer.



Room to grow

As your company expands, you're likely to need a dedicated machine for the job. First, you have to find the right compact tractor and attachments to fit your capabilities and the opportunities in your market, Gifford says.

"Then weigh the additional revenue those capabilities will bring in against the cost of the equipment," he says.

Include all operating costs — to transport and maintain the equipment, to name just two — in addition to the purchase price.

If it looks as though a compact tractor is in your future, be sure you get a happy marriage of tractor and attachments.

"The compact tractor and attachments should come with a comprehensive list of specifications," Gifford says. "Review these carefully and make sure they match in terms of capabilities."

Gifford advises landscapers to purchase combination products as a package. By buying the attachments from the same dealer, you're likely to get the most affordable pricing and a simpler (and perhaps more attractive) financing package.

"Do your homework and talk with your dealer to determine what attach-

ments make the most sense for your business, then purchase them together with your compact tractor," he says. "This will make it easier to budget, because once you purchase and finance the tractor, you can't go back and add attachments to your finance package."

Dedicated machines typically require larger trucks or trailers to transport, Paschke says. Get to a certain size, and the state may require a different license for moving heavy equipment.

"It isn't just about the cost of the machine ... it's the total cost of ownership," he says.

To get a good estimate, Mercer suggests giving your equipment an hourly rate and dividing that by your total investment. Hourly rate can be figured by dividing all fixed costs (lease or loan payment plus insurance and depreciation) and variable costs (labor, maintenance, fuel) by the hours of use.

"If there's a labor savings, you can compare an old piece of equipment to the new for quicker payback," Mercer says.

The match game

The simplest way to assure that mix-and-match attachments are properly sized to the drive unit is to buy from

COMBO MACHINES

the same manufacturer. Many short-line companies produce equipment purpose-designed for landscaping operations that are worth the money. If short-line equipment is in your future, it's important to work with a dealer you know and trust to match the equipment to the drive unit.

"It used to be there was a clean split between compacts and utility tractors at 40 hp," Paschke says, citing how compact tractors used a Cat 1 hitch and utilities had a Cat 2 hitch as an example. "There are utility tractors

"A MACHINE BUILT TO HANDLE A VARIETY OF ATTACHMENTS IS GOING TO DELIVER A BETTER RETURN ON INVESTMENT THAN A SINGLE-PURPOSE MACHINE."

— ROGER GIFFORD, CUB CADET YANMAR

down in the 30- to 40-hp range and compacts up around 60 hp. That makes it vital to determine the linkage, the geometry of the hitch and the right hitch ball size for every attachment. Don't just go on tractor type."

Paschke says a landscaper using a box scraper to grade a yard easily could hit a sidewalk or paved driveway.

"If you have too small a box blade behind too big a tractor, something is going to break," he says.

While manufacturers will have spot-on recommendations for their own brand equipment, look at the dealer in each case.

"You want a dealer with a full line of machine forms and attachments," Paschke says. "As your business grows and you're ready to expand to dedicated machines, you'll be able to trade up with the same dealership, someone who knows your business and will make serving you a priority."

DON'T OVERBUY

There's no reason to buy equipment or attachments your business can't use.

Tim Mercer, value stream director of turf products and Auburn operations for Ariens, says you should ask the following questions:

- ▶ Does your business have the ability to profit from the purchase of additional attachments?
- ▶ Does the manufacturer recommend and/or sell the attachments for the equipment?
- ▶ How long does it take to change attachments?
- ▶ What tools are needed for changeover?
- ▶ What are the warranty, parts and service associated with the equipment and attachments?

Try all the attachments to make sure they perform to your expectations using the same standards you look for in a single-purpose machine for its intended purpose, he adds.

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