

Lease or buy?

Short-term and long-term investments each have their benefits and drawbacks. **BY CURT HARLER**

EVEN AS the economy starts to get back on an even keel, there are few landscape contractors with money to throw around. However, they still need to replace and update equipment. During a time when every nickel counts — and cash flow is king — contractors might wonder whether it's better to buy or lease new equipment.

"It's never black and white," says Tom Dowd, manager of lease administration for John Deere Credit in Des Moines, IA. "There

are no rules of thumb that can be used to determine whether a lease is applicable."

But there are several things to consider when making the lease versus purchase decision. Before you push the buttons on your calculator, determine whether the equipment you're thinking of leasing carries a high purchase option. The higher a purchase option, the more advantages a lease offers, Dowd says.

To make the decision more complicated, the definition of what a high-purchase option is varies, depending on the evaluated equipment. Determine whether the equipment will be used for short-term, incremental projects or to meet long-term basic needs.

TAKE AWAY

The best scenario is to finance equipment until you have the cash to pay it off.

Determine how much use you would have for the equipment over the long term.

Talk beforehand with your financial advisors about the potential tax savings (and pitfalls) regarding your equipment leases and purchases.



Making monthly payments on seasonal equipment is helpful, says George Kinkead, president of Minneapolis-based Turfco.

“Instead of having big spikes, leasing can level the cash flow,” Kinkead says. “The right answer on lease versus buy is to finance equipment until the point at which you have the cash to pay it off.”

Each situation must be analyzed as a separate event.

“Leasing seems to make most sense when a landscaper is awarded a short-term contract and needs additional equipment to complete the job, but isn’t certain there’s a need for the equipment beyond the term of the contract,” Dowd says. “Purchasing seems to make most sense when the customer plans to use the equipment for a long time.”

ARE THINGS DIFFERENT IN TODAY’S ECONOMY?

Old-timers often claim that today’s economy is different than anything they’ve ever seen. But that doesn’t mean the lease-versus-buy rules change. The advantages of leasing don’t change as the economic situation changes, says Tom Dowd, manager of lease administration for John Deere Credit in Des Moines, IA. However, the magnitude of the benefits from the advantages does change.

For example, the time when leasing seems to be most active is right before an economic downturn.

“This is because the leasing advantage of matching incremental equipment needs with current jobs has a much bigger benefit if the economy is slowing,” Dowd says.

Because the likelihood of having a need for the equipment is less if the economy has slowed, a contractor can count on being able to return the equipment at the end of the lease term, and won’t have to try to remarket a used piece of equipment in a down equipment market.

In a healthy economy, leasing offers another benefit: cash flow, which conserves the bank’s line of credit for other uses. The advantage of leasing is the same, Dowd says. However, the economic situation changes the benefit.

One successful strategy is to use the lease terms to spread the payments over a couple years, then buy the equipment and continue to use it.

Kinkead cautions against thinking about landscape equipment leasing on the same terms as a car lease, however.

“Capital, durable equipment, like renovation equipment, typically will last more than two or three years,” he says. “It’s a cash-flow question. Especially for a smaller operator, it’s probably better not to write a check for the full cost of equipment. It’s better to buy as the business grows and pay for equipment out of cash flow.”

For low-hour users who take care of their machinery, it pays to keep the equipment after the lease ends.

“Any time you lease equipment, you need to know what you’ll do with it at the end of the lease,” Kinkead says.

Additionally, you (and your accountants) should know how you’ll generate the revenue to buy a piece of equipment, and how much you’re willing to pay in interest for the privilege of keeping the machine.

On the plus side, leasing allows a business to upgrade its equipment frequently. If nothing else, having new, modern, shiny equipment helps create a prestigious image. And on the more practical side, new equipment eliminates down time and lowers maintenance costs.

Benefits of leasing

A lease generally requires less cash up front and has lower payments than traditional financing. The cash flow advantage is created because of the establishment of a purchase option at the end of the lease, Dowd says.

Initially, a contractor isn’t paying for the purchase option. At the end of the lease, the customer makes a decision to purchase or return the equipment. Higher purchase options create a better cash flow advantage for a lease, Dowd says.

A contractor will often have what Dowd calls “incremental equipment needs” when he or she is awarded a short-term contract.

“A lease offers a landscaper a way to acquire additional equipment to perform the contracted work, and match the term and cost of the additional equipment with income generated from the new contract,” he says.

Kinkead agrees leasing allows a contractor to bid on jobs or offer new services. Then, once the contractor has a feel for who will buy the services, he or she can lease equipment to match the need.

“I recommend having a sense of where you’re going with your business so you don’t get into equipment if you don’t have the jobs to cover the cost,” Kinkead says.

It’s recommended to sell the jobs first, and then lease equipment in sufficient size and quantity to cover the contracts you have in hand.

Leasing makes sense for seasonal equipment, too. Aeration, for example, is a job typically done in the spring and fall. While you may need an aerator for both seasons, it’s likely that you won’t generate sufficient revenue to pay for it until late in the year. Lease payments spread out the cost.

Income tax benefits

Another strategy involves off-balance sheet financing, which are leases structured as true leases that don’t pass title to a contractor.

Work with your accountant to keep current with tax rules on financing.

“The landscaper currently doesn’t need



Section 179
 Your company can lease equipment and still take full advantage of the Section 179 deduction. In fact, leasing equipment with the Section 179 deduction is a sound financial strategy for many businesses, as it can significantly reduce cash flow, but with profits as well.

Capital Lease
 A capital lease is that you can still take full advantage of the Section 179 deduction, yet make smaller payments. With a non-tax capital lease, you can write off \$250,000 worth of equipment this year, without paying \$250,000 this year. A small business that is managing cash flow can lease and still take the Section 179 Deduction.

Leasing
 Non-tax capital leases include a \$1.00 Buyout, and a 10% Purchase Option (PUT) Lease. In many cases, the amount you save in taxes is the total of your first year’s payments.

Financing
 To obtain an equipment loan using an Equipment Finance Agreement, you will take the Section 179 Deduction.

Leasing and Financing
 The advantage to leasing or financing equipment and then taking the Section 179 deduction is the fact that you can deduct the full amount of the equipment this year. The amount you save in taxes is the full amount this year. The amount you save in taxes is the full amount this year. The amount you save in taxes is the full amount this year. The amount you save in taxes is the full amount this year.

“IF A CUSTOMER KNOWS THEY ARE GOING TO PURCHASE THE EQUIPMENT, A LEASE IS NOT LIKELY THE BEST MEANS TO FACILITATE THE PURCHASE”

TOM DOWD, manager, lease administration, John Deere Credit



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to record an asset or liability on his financial statements for a lease,” Dowd says.

Talk to your accountant for up-to-date information about this strategy. The Financial Accounting Standard Board (FASB) is in the process of making changes to the rules about off-balance sheet financing. Presently, a lease can be structured so a contractor doesn't show the asset on the balance sheet. Monthly payments are made like any other expense.

The FASB will likely rewrite the rules by 2011 to change off-balance sheet financing. It's expected that the changes will be retroactive — which means contractors will have to take future lease payments, capitalize the payment stream and show that as a liability. If the lessor expects to buy the equipment at the end of the lease term, that purchase option will have to be capitalized.

There are other tax implications: True leases allow 100% of the lease payment to be deducted for income tax purposes.

“If a landscaper has maximized his Section 179 deductions on his income tax return, a lease structured with a large payment up front may offer a way for the landscaper to get a bigger deduction on his income tax return,” Dowd says.

Again, consult a tax advisor to determine whether a specific lease offers a higher deduction.

Leasing pitfalls

While there are many advantages to leasing, you can incur a higher total cost if you decide to purchase and own the equipment. For example, renovation equipment and sod cutters are more likely candidates for leasing than mowers. You probably know how many hours will be put on a mower, and when your business grows to require another mower, it can be purchased. By contrast, renovation equipment use is sporadic, and adding another truck to the fleet

“DON'T GET INTO EQUIPMENT IF YOU DON'T HAVE THE JOBS TO COVER THE COST”

GEORGE KINKEAD, president, Turfco

probably doesn't require purchasing or leasing another sod cutter. One can be shared.

A contractor who thinks a lease avoids maintenance costs is in for a surprise, however. It's best to treat leased equipment as though you'll own it forever.

If you decide to exercise your purchase option at the end of the lease, the lease typically will result in a higher overall cost to purchase the equipment, Dowd says, adding that leasing isn't a less costly way to purchase equipment.

“If a customer knows he's going to purchase the equipment, a lease isn't likely the best means to facilitate the purchase,” he says.

Additionally, all leases have requirements about the same condition and miles or hours allowed on the equipment when it's returned. This includes everything from pickup trucks to zero-turn mowers.

If the equipment is returned at the end of the lease and doesn't meet these requirements, there are abuse or excess use charges assessed to the customer, Dowd says. If the equipment is going to be used an excessive number of hours or in a harsh environment, a lease isn't likely the best option.

Money-saving strategies

Dowd says he has seen customers who have maximized their Section 179 deductions for leased equipment for one year, then purchased the equipment at the end of the lease, using the section 179 deduction in the next year. This way, a contractor gains use of the equipment in the current year — and maximizes his or her deductions for tax purposes.

Dowd also has seen customers lease equipment when they've been awarded short-term contracts, and then return the equipment at the end of the contract term. **LMM**

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It's a wide, wide World Wide Web

Whether it's creating a site to share your company with clients or figuring out the best browser to surf through cyberspace, the Internet is ripe with opportunity. **BY TYLER WHITAKER**

WEB BROWSERS are an integral part of online life. And for most of us, judging from Web statistics, our online adventures usually start by opening Internet Explorer. "Are there other Web browsers?" you may ask. The answer is yes — and your choice of browser may be more important than you expect.

Which browser you use not only affects your Web surfing experience, but plays a small part in the ongoing browser war. In the early days of the Internet, you had the choice between Internet Explorer and Netscape. But now the number of available Web browsers is growing — as are the reasons to get beyond your default browser and explore what the rest of the Web has to offer.

HTML Web standards

When it comes to the Web site programming languages, standards matter. It might surprise you to know that there is an official standards committee that oversees Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) and the functionality every browser should support. The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) decides the future of HTML and what new features will be added.

As the number of Web browsers has grown, some proprietary Web browsers have implemented non-standard dialects of HTML, leading to problems with Web sites looking and acting differently on various browsers.

TAKE AWAY

A professional-looking Web site is a must-have for marketing these days.

Your site should be easy to edit and update at a moment's notice.

WordPress offers a user-friendly way to design and update your site to your specifications.



These differences cost us, as business owners, every time we make changes to our Web sites. The extra testing and bug fixing by our Web developers for each non-standard browser takes money out of our pockets.

Memory and speed

Performance is another key item to consider when choosing a Web browser. Time adds up fast when you are waiting for Web pages to render on your screen. Recently, Google's Chrome browser and Mozilla's Firefox 3.5 have made huge improvements in both faster speed and lower memory consumption. These enhancements translate into much higher performance — the ability to open more active browser windows, with fewer crashes than most other browsers. These performance gains allow your existing desktop computer hardware to last longer without upgrading.

Automatic upgrades

Time seems to pass quickly on the Internet. Gone are the days when we expected new versions of our favorite software packages on an annual basis. Software updates are now available multiple times a month. This is good news from a security and reliability perspective, but unfortunately, too many businesses get caught in the "Don't Change Anything" trap. It's too easy to think that if it works, we shouldn't fix it.

If you are not staying current on the latest version of your browser, you truly are missing out on the best productivity

improvements, security updates and newest features. Consider upgrading to the most recent version of your favorite browser and leaving the automatic upgrades option on so you will continuously be up-to-date.

Your choice of browser can encourage innovation and forward momentum with Web standards. Ensure your continued productivity and security by staying current on the latest browser versions. Every little bit helps.

From surfer to surfed

While you can't control which browsers clients use to access your Web site, you do need to engage them once they get there.

Let's be honest. Building a good-looking and functional Web site can be a challenge. Once it's built, keeping it updated can feel like an ongoing and losing battle. But I have a few suggestions to ease your Web site pain and turn that chore into a pleasure.

Most small-business sites are built one of two ways: You know a family member or teenage neighbor who can put a basic Web site together, or your Internet-hosting provider has a template-based system that can help you build a site by uploading your logo and text. Neither is a bad solution if you just need something to start with, but the result often lacks quality.

Larger companies have the marketing funds and access to talent to build top-notch Web sites with all the bells and whistles. If they're smart, they add administrative capabilities for their staff to add new content easily without the need to understand HTML, JavaScript and other Web technologies. They understand good Web sites are changing and improving constantly.

However, anyone who has hired an external Web design firm understands this route can become costly and limiting quickly. What you want is a solution with the following capabilities:

- 1 The ability to edit your site in a simple and efficient manner** that doesn't require tracking down the nearest IT guy. This includes uploading pictures and video.
- 2 The ability to update the style, colors and layout whenever you like.** Calling your local graphic artist and asking for a Web-site makeover — and then rebuilding the entire site



PUTTING THEORY INTO PRACTICE

On my own desktop, I'm currently running the following:

- › **Google Chrome** is my default browser for everyday Web surfing. Its fast, clean interface — and integration with Google — lets me focus on finding the information I need quickly.
- › For all of my Web development needs, I use **Mozilla Firefox 3.5**. It's a full-featured browser with plenty of optional features available through its use of add-ons and plug-ins.
- › **Internet Explorer 8** is installed, but only for testing purposes. It's much better than older versions, but pales in comparison to Chrome and Firefox. — *TW*

"DO YOURSELF A FAVOR AND UPGRADE YOUR WEB SITE USING WORDPRESS. YOUR SITE WILL LOOK BETTER, BE MORE UP-TO-DATE AND COST YOU LESS IN THE LONG RUN."

— can be a nightmare. A content management system (CMS) is much better. Traditionally, though, they've existed only within large companies because of their cost and complexity. What's the alternative that doesn't require spending the entire marketing budget? Read on.

An accessible solution

Recently, several open-source systems have been built with the small business in mind. My favorite is WordPress from Automatic. At first glance, WordPress looks like a Web-blogging application — and it is. But if you look closer, you'll see a system with all the power and flexibility of a large CMS without the associated complexity and cost.

As an open-source program, the software, along with a large collection of site themes, is free. The themes allow you to customize the look of your site in an easy-to-manage way. No more waiting for the designer to get back to you. Don't like the current theme? Change it. Need to add new pages, images or video? No problem. You can even add additional functionality through the use of plug-ins, which extend the site's features without involving special programming. It's that easy.

Most Web-hosting providers offer WordPress as optional software to install on your site. It requires the PHP programming language and a MySQL database to run, but those are standard defaults at almost all Web-hosting providers.

So do yourself a favor and upgrade your Web site using WordPress. Your

site will look better, be more up-to-date and cost you less in the long run — and that's something to blog about. **LM**

The author is a freelance technologist. Contact him at 801/592-2810 or visit www.tylerwhitaker.com.



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Products



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Before and after

Visual Impact Imaging offers professional landscape design software. The easy-to-use Earthscapes application allows users to communicate their landscape vision through the use of digital photos. Simply drag and drop your design features onto a "before" photo. Earthscapes includes a site plan designer, an estimator, and plant and hardscape libraries. VisualImpactImaging.com or 330/259-7661



Touch of concrete

Do you ever find yourself in need of a small amount of concrete? The new 3.5-yd. concrete mixer is just the answer. Fully self-contained and powered by a diesel engine, this attachment can be hoisted onto the truck within one minute ready to be loaded. With an Ampliroll HookLift, it changes your truck into a multi-tasking machine. AmplirollUSA.com or 866/822-3580



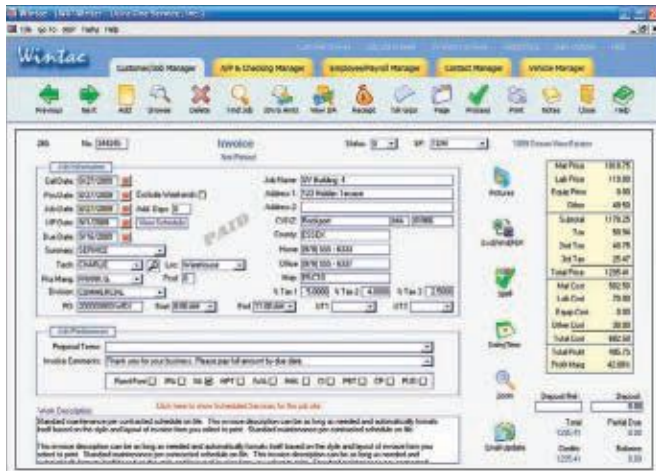
Be weather wise

Campbell Scientific's new Visual-Weather 3.0 software program integrates many enhancements from the previous version, including support for the ET107 and Toro T107, enhanced station-status and station-data screens, as well as improved Web output and FTP support. Changes have been made to the underlying database to allow faster report generation. A free trial version is available. CampbellSci.com/visual-weather or 435/753-2342

Valve variety

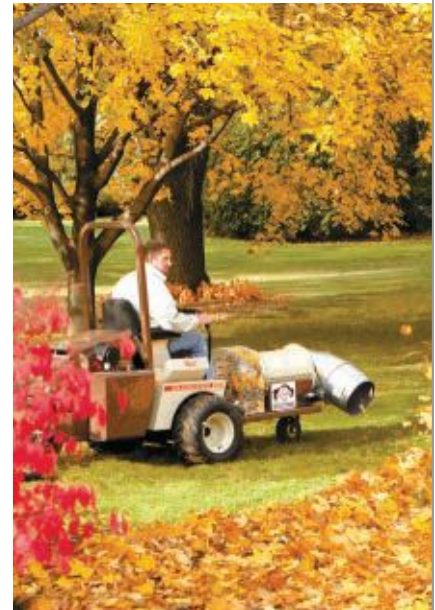
Constructed of premium UV-resistant PVC plastic and high-grade stainless steel, K-Rain's new Pro-150 line of professional-grade plastic irrigation valves is available in 1-, 1.5- and 2-in. body configurations. Featuring a pressure rating of 150 psi, each valve includes the premium-grade K-Rain solenoid that is hand-assembled and epoxy-encapsulated for proven leak-free reliability and longevity. A double-beaded diaphragm provides years of reliable operation. All models carry a two-year limited warranty. Krain.com or 561/844-1002





New release

Intac International announces the release of Wintac 2010 business software. A completely redesigned user interface offers intuitive navigation and operation. In addition, more than 50 new features and enhancements have been added to provide more searching, sorting, reporting, and graphing options, as well as advanced mobile computing capabilities. A free demo is available. Wintac.net or 800/724-7899



Quiet control

Use Grasshopper's Turbine Blower, featuring zero-turn maneuverability, to clean leaves and debris from congested, hard-to-reach or wide open areas and long stretches of walkways and curbs in a fraction of the time required by backpack blowers and walk-behind units. Turbine blowers are quieter than most debris blowers and offer 360-degree nozzle rotation — controlled remotely from the operator's station — making it easy to direct airflow up to 9,500 cfm at more than 150 mph precisely for faster cleanup. The blower mounts on Grasshopper 700 and 900 Series power units. GrasshopperMower.com or 620/345-8621



Soil savvy

Available in 60 and 72 in., Bobcat's new soil conditioner for compact tractors and the

Toolcat 5610 utility work machine helps produce seed and sod beds. It also windrows and separates rocks or other ground debris, grades and levels topsoil, removes old sod and pulverizes clumps of dirt. When the removable end plates are attached to the implement, material is contained within to sort it from the finished area or to move it from one area to another. With the end plates removed, material can be spread evenly across the work area. Bobcat.com or 701/241-8700

Bark and bite

FINN Corp. offers the BB302 and BB705 models of trailer-mounted bark blowers. The BB302 is powered by a 33.5-hp, V1505 Kubota diesel engine and has a 1.5 cu.-yd.-capacity hopper. This allows the blower to deliver more than 10 cu. yds. of bark mulch per hour, five times faster than by hand. Featuring a 4.5 cubic-yard capacity hopper, the BB705 is powered by a 71-hp, V3300 Kubota diesel engine, which allows larger, heavier varieties of bulk material to be applied. Both models feature a radio remote control system, a 150-ft. durable, flexible hose and a rear-mounted hose reel. FinnCorp.com or 800/543-7166



Cleaner air

Stihl's professional BR 600 backpack leaf blower offers vigorous blowing power, a low emissions engine and comfortable weight. A recent study conducted by the Porsche Engineering Group GmbH found that this unit is up to 28% more fuel efficient than competitive models, which can provide up to \$644 in fuel savings per unit in two seasons, depending on fuel costs and run time. In addition, it exceeds current EPA emission standards by 73%. StihlUSA.com or 757/486-9100



Walk or ride

Wright's Velke pistol grip mowers are available with deck widths of 32, 36, 48 and 52 in. It can be operated as a walkbehind for tight spaces, or it can be paired with Wright's Velke foldaway sulky for ride-behind convenience. The compact Velke has large drive tires and a hydraulic control system, with fewer parts for greater reliability.

WrightMfg.com or 301/360-9810



Major League catchers

Specialty Equipment offers a complete line of steel, stainless steel and cloth grass catchers, all made in the USA. The "industry first" usage of a tough coat paint on the steel catchers give the units a similar finish and durability to spray-in truck bed liners. The stainless steel version offers the wear characteristics of aluminum catchers, with the durability of stainless steel. Both versions are available in 3.3- and 4.4-cu.-ft. capacities. A newly offered cloth catcher completes the lineup, with a durable steel frame and lightweight cloth bag featuring a poly-reinforced bottom for extended wear. *SpecialtyEquipmentUSA.com or 772/398-2270*



Go green

Both the Mete-R-Matic III (pictured) and Mete-R-Matic XL topdressers feature a patented Chevron belt that delivers uniform application regardless of moisture content, whether it's sand, compost, crumb rubber or calcined clays. An eco-friendly, patented ground drive system assures uniform spread, even at varying speeds. And with no hydraulics, PTOs or engines, speed calibration is not required. The Mete-R-Matic III features a 23-cu.-ft. hopper capacity; the Mete-R-Matic XL features a 60-cu.-ft. capacity. Both machines include a three-year warranty.

Turfco.com or 800/679-8201

The lighter side

With new light material sides now available as an option for Earth & Turf's MultiSpread Model 320, the 1-cubic yd. topdresser virtually doubles its capacity when spreading light materials such as compost, calcined clay, etc. The maximum load capacity using the light material sides is 3,600 lbs. Available in two-wheel ground drive or hydraulic drive, the unit's 26 x 12.00-12 turf tires ensure easy pulling by 20-hp tractors. Its overall height with light material sides, plus narrow overall width, allows operators to reach in easily from either side to cut crumbed rubber super sacks when loading. Light material sides are available for dealer or customer installation, shipped either separately or together with new machines.

EarthAndTurf.com or 888/693-2638



Hit the deck

Bri-Mar's Tilt-Deck Haulers, models CHT18-10 and CHT18-7, are 18-ft.-long tilt bed haulers with 10k and 7k GVWRs. The low-angle, diamond plate steel deck includes a power tilt function that simplifies loading and unloading operations. Both models feature 5-in. channel tongue and main frame and 2x4 tube outer bed rails; an easy-load, 10-degree tilt angle; recessed D-rings; a Monarch power unit for up/down hydraulics with a 20-ft. wired remote (a wireless remote is available as an option); tandem Dexter EZ Lube axles, both with electric brakes; 15-in. tires; rubber-mounted LED lights; an acid etch bath preceding a Valspar powdercoat finish; and a two-year warranty.

Bri-Mar.com or 717/263-6116



Quiet power

The Shindaiwa EB802 backpack blower features a convenient "hush mode" switch that reduces the sound level to 65 dB(A). In addition, the 4.3-hp, 2-cycle blower uses a special leaf guard design that minimizes any risk of overheating from leaf blockage. A newly designed and ergonomic lightweight frame uses a padded shoulder strap harness system that

Shindaiwa.com or 800/521-7733

Clean sweep

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patios, brick, pavers, pool sides, along walls, in corners and can even clean short turf. It features a patented T-bar handle for hard-to-reach places. *HaagaGreatLakes.com or 651/695-1900*



Now in 3D

Structure Studios' new VizTerra 3D landscape design software allows an entire design to be in complete 3D, with hundreds of fully rendered plant and tree species. The realistic presentation even allows the customer to see in real time how the design appears at different times of day, from morning to night. The program produces professional plans ready for construction. Designers can choose from a library of more than 2,000 industry standard symbols to represent plant species and container sizes. Free technical support, training and software updates are included. *StructureStudios.com or 800/778-8996*

Pneumatic blower

Express Blower's new TM-45 spreads a wide variety of materials, including compost, mulches, soil blends, aggregates and wood chips, with a level load capacity of approximately 45 cu. yds. Powered by a 275-hp Caterpillar C-7 engine, the TM-45 is a fully self-contained, steel-framed aluminum box designed to be mounted on a variety of truck or trailer configurations. The patented Supplemental Injection System allows users to uniformly apply mixes through Express Blower's Terraseeding process. *ExpressBlower.com or 800/543-7166*



Versatile features

John Deere Landscapes' new zero-turn LESCO Z-Two Spreader/Sprayer, featuring a 19-hp, high-performance Kawasaki engine, offers ergonomic controls, an extra-wide stance, a 40-gal. liquid application tank and an 82-in., five-nozzle handheld wand for spot spraying. It also features a 125-lb. LESCO electric spreader with remote-actuated gate and side deflector. The design of the spreader and boom on a standard 2-in. hitch assembly allows the operator to move the spreader from the rear to the front, add an additional spreader to the front, or remove and attach the spreader and/or boom to a utility vehicle or truck. A carrying tray offers additional granular storage; an optional 15-gal. spot sprayer is available. *JohnDeere.com or 800/347-4272*



Durable and compact

The all-new SA 2700 handheld blower from Efcó offers a maximum air volume of 412 cfm and air speed of 146 mph. It's backed by Efcó's "Five Year No Fear" (five-year consumer, two-year professional) warranty. It also features a silenced muffler for reduced noise and double anti-vibration mounts for operator comfort. The SA 2700 is equipped with a 30.5 cc engine and weighs 9.9 lbs. In addition, it converts to a vacuum to collect leaves and debris, which are then finely shredded by four steel blades for reduced volume. *EfcóPower.com or 800/800-4420*