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LM REPORTS

YOUR GUIDE TO PRODUCT RESEARCH » WWW.LANDSCAPEMANAGEMENT.NET/SEARCH

COMPACT TRACTORS



BEFORE YOU BUY

When you're in the market for a new compact tractor, consider the kinds of accounts where you'll be using it. You'll also want to think about:

- ▶ Horsepower;
- ▶ Traction and control;
- ▶ Automatic vs. manual transmission;
- ▶ Gas vs. diesel engine;
- ▶ Cutting blade size;
- ▶ Steering system;
- ▶ Lift capacity (when outfitted as a loader);
- ▶ Rollover protection and other safety features;
- ▶ Ergonomic design to reduce operator fatigue; and
- ▶ Attachments from snow plow blades to cup holders

↑ Cub Cadet Yanmar

The large chassis of the new Ex450 compact tractor from Cub Cadet Yanmar can accommodate a wide array of attachments, including a front loader with a universal quick-attach bucket, backhoe and three-point implements. Features include a 9x9 transmission, a four-cylinder, 45-hp diesel engine, and a lift capacity of more than 2,400 lbs. www.cubcadetyanmar.com or 877/CUB-5055

Allis-Chalmers

The Allis-Chalmers line has been reintroduced by Briggs & Stratton. The all-new AC130 series of tractors features a 14-in. turning radius, simple pedal operation, and a hydro-automatic transmission. The affordable series includes 42- and 46-in. cutting widths. www.allischalmerslawn.com

Husqvarna

All of Husqvarna's LS Series tractors with 46-in. or greater widths have welded, rein-

forced cutting decks with Air Induction mowing technology. The decks are easy to maintain with the built-in deck wash system, allowing users to simply connect the garden hose to wash the underside. For user comfort, the Husqvarna LS Series has a 15-in.-high back seat, ergonomically arranged controls and step-through design. www.usa.husqvarna.com or 800/HUSKY-62

Montana Tractors

Montana offers a wide range of compact and utility tractors with models ranging from 23 hp to 70 hp. Montana tractors are available in compact 4-wheel-drive models and utility models with a choice of 2- or four-wheel drive. The utility models offer a choice of open station with rollover protection system or wrap-around, high-visibility Big Sky Cab. Implements include front-end loaders, scrapers, pallet forks, rotary cutters, finish mowers, rear tillers, rear blades, yard rakes, box blades, post hole diggers, augers, spreaders, discs, dump trailers, wagons and backhoes. www.montanatractors.com or 800/872-1910

John Deere

The 3000 TWENTY Series offers four models ranging from 30 hp to 44 gross hp with Yanmar Tier II-compliant diesel engines and turbo-charged performance. The eHydro transmission provides superior speed selection and productivity with no clutching or shifting required. Deere's patented features such as LoadMatch, MotionMatch, SpeedMatch, the new performance tracking system. An automotive-style diagnostic control center, provides operator convenience. www.deere.com or 800/537-8233

Kiotei

Kiotei introduces the DK75 tractor, featuring a 75-hp, 268.5-cu.-in. turbo-charged diesel engine, mounted to a fully synchronized transmission with 12 gears. www.KIOTEI.com or 877/GO-KIOTEI

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Snapper

The GT600 subcompact garden tractor features a 27-hp diesel engine and four-wheel drive. The Briggs & Stratton 27-hp Vanguard diesel is a three-cylinder, fuel-injected engine that offers high torque, fuel economy and extended maintenance intervals. The tractor features a 54-in. deep-profile mower with anti-scalp rollers for a precision cut without scalping. www.snapper.com or 888/SNAPPER

New Holland

As part of New Holland's Lean and Mean series of economy tractors, the three-cylinder, 30-hp T1510 compact tractor can be customized with a choice of transmissions, two-wheel drive or front-wheel

drive axle and other features. The T1510 boasts several standard feature upgrades compared to the TC30 model it replaces, including a foldable ROPS (Roll Over Protective Structure) for height restrictions or special work, two-position extendable drawbar and a fender-mounted cup holder. www.newholland.com or 866/726-3396

Ventrac

The 4200VXD series of compact tractors enhances maneuverability and stability by conforming to the contour of the terrain. Operators can choose either gas or diesel, liquid-cooled engines ranging from 27-hp to a 31-hp TURBO Diesel. More than 30 attachments, designed with Ventrac's Minute Mount System, are available. www.ventrac.com or 866/VENTRAC



Mahindra USA

Mahindra USA's 2816 model boasts a 28-hp engine and lift capacity of 2,205 lbs. The three-cylinder tractor is ergonomically designed, counting a foldable rollover protection system (ROPS) and four-wheel-drive among its standard features. The 2816 is available in either gear or hydrostatic transmission to meet user needs. www.mahindrausa.com / 800-887-2286

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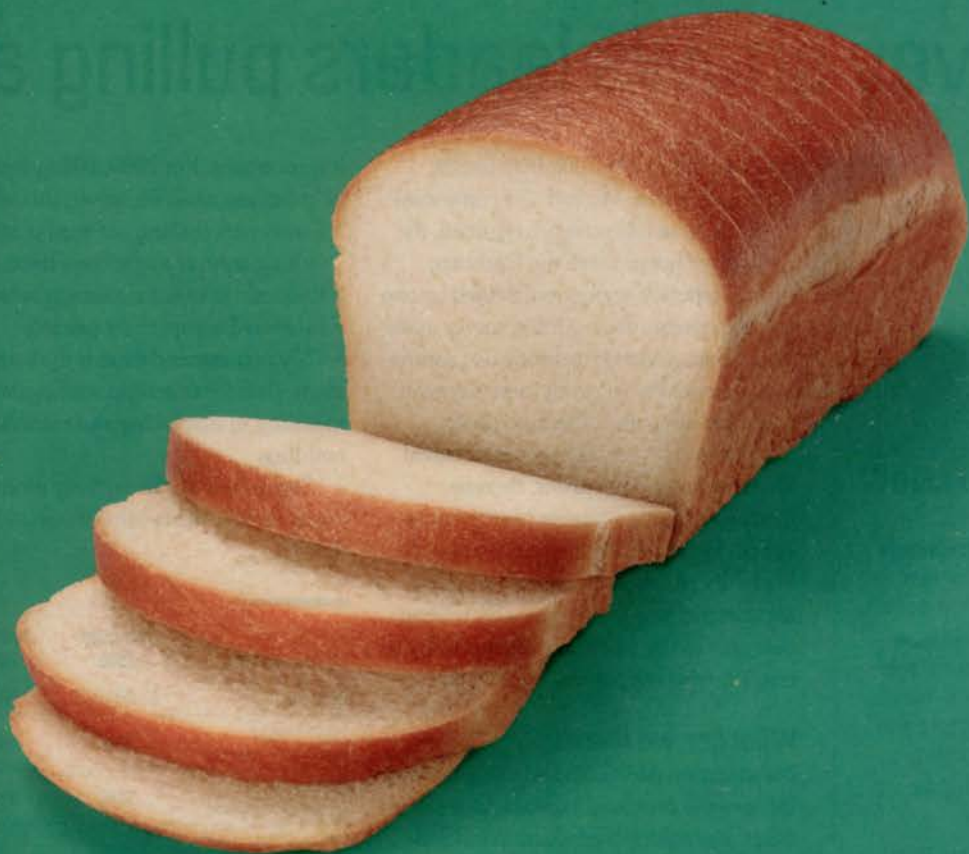
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PROVEN SOLUTIONS



THE BENCHMARK

KEVIN KEHOE

The author is the owner-manager of Kehoe & Co. Contact him at kkehoe@earthlink.net.

Survey shows leaders pulling away

The results of our 2008 Benchmark Survey are in. We had 154 companies respond to our survey. In general, the average net profit in the landscape construction segments declined by two to three percentage points since our last survey a few years ago. By contrast, grounds maintenance companies actually experienced a net profit improvement.

At the same time, the high profit companies in every segment maintained the same level of net profit, thereby increasing their advantage over the average performance level. The accompanying tables clearly show this. To simplify the comparisons, I am using a \$2 million company as the baseline and reporting the cost/expense as a percent of revenue.

What can we learn?

Construction (bid/build and design/build): Increases in overhead expenses more than offset very solid job production efficiencies for this group. For 2009, declining commodity prices will help reduce some overhead expenses (mainly fuel), but the

real challenge for this segment is revenues.

Given the economic slowdown and the increasing competitiveness for the fewer opportunities remaining, gross margins will be under a lot of pressure. This means that companies in this segment will need to review and update their estimating systems and tighten default production factors and material costs.

At the same time, I am recommending staff cutbacks for many of my clients to address potential revenue declines. This means owner-managers will need to be more involved than ever in day-to-day operations, and remaining overhead staff will need to wear more hats.

Grounds maintenance: Increased job production efficiencies for this group, combined with overhead expense controls, contributed to the net profit

improvement. For 2009, falling fuel prices will really help this segment. However, this will be offset by:

- › Customers seeking reduced contract budgets (asking contractors to save them money);
- › Reductions in enhancement sales; and
- › Increased competitive pricing.

My recommendation is the same for this segment: Reduce overhead staffing, while increasing spending in marketing and information system building.

Stay tuned. In the coming months, I will break down further the results of our 2008 Benchmark Survey.

TERMS TO KNOW

Gross margin percentage is gross profit dollars divided by revenue dollars.

Gross profit is revenue minus direct production labor payroll, job materials, subcontractors and job equipment rentals.

Overhead is all other expenses.

Net profit is gross profit minus overhead.

Construction	Average 2005	Average 2008	High Profit 2008
Revenue	\$2,000,000	\$2,000,000	\$2,000,000
Gross margin <i>(as percent of revenue)</i>	33%	36%	45%
Overhead <i>(as percent of revenue)</i>	28%	33%	37%
Net profit <i>(as percent of revenue)</i>	\$100,000 5%	\$60,000 3%	\$160,000 8%

Design/Build	Average 2005	Average 2008	High Profit 2008
Revenue	\$2,000,000	\$2,000,000	\$1,000,000
Gross margin <i>(as percent of revenue)</i>	46%	46%	48%
Overhead <i>(as percent of revenue)</i>	39%	42%	34%
Net profit <i>(as percent of revenue)</i>	\$140,000 7%	\$80,000 4%	\$140,000 14%

Maintenance	Average 2005	Average 2008	High Profit 2008
Revenue	\$2,000,000	2,000,000	2,000,000
Gross margin <i>(as percent of revenue)</i>	52%	54%	56%
Overhead <i>(as percent of revenue)</i>	44%	44%	40%
Net profit <i>(as percent of revenue)</i>	\$160,000 8%	\$200,000 10%	\$280,000 14%

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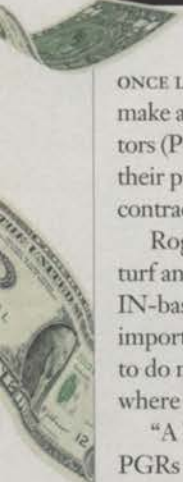
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MAKING PGRs PROFITABLE

Plant growth regulators are engineered to help contractors save labor and fuel. BY CURT HARLER



ONCE LANDSCAPERS REALIZE they can make a buck using plant growth regulators (PGRs), they will make them part of their programs. But the problem is many contractors don't understand PGRs.

Roger Storey, vice president of the turf and ornamental unit at Carmel, IN-based SePRO, stresses that it's important to see the value. "If you want to do more with the same crew, that's where PGRs can help," he says.

"A lot of landscapers are afraid of PGRs because they don't feel they have adequate knowledge about using them," says Laylah VanBibber, director of marketing at PBI Gordon, Kansas

City, MO. Many more landscapers use PGRs for ornamental treatments than for mowing, she says.

PBI Gordon finished a study of 584 landscapers early in December and found that just 7.1% use PGRs for mowing, most citing the cost of the product and uncertainty about use.

About two-thirds of those responding charge for their services on a per-mow basis. It's tough for them to justify a higher cost service to the customer when the customer sees fewer mowings.

But industry sources say, and studies show, that PGRs can more than pay for themselves with labor and fuel savings on the turf-maintenance side as well.

Stay manicured longer

Contract mowers have an easier time justifying PGRs. It's simple to cost-justify PGRs on hard-to-mow or dangerous areas. Steep hillsides or ditch banks are perfect for PGR use. The seedhead-suppression is good, too, especially on larger, more remote turf areas.

"Without raggedy seedheads sticking up, a far-away area will look trim for a longer time without additional mowing," VanBibber says.

Another key market is cemeteries or other places with a lot of trimming required. "PGRs are a great tool to spray around headstones to reduce trimming," says Dennis Shepard, Ph.D., a technical representative for Syngenta Professional Products.

Labor, equipment costs and clipping removal figure large in the PBI Gordon study. Travel to the job site does not.

Interestingly, 48% of contractors bag clippings. Reducing the number of clippings to remove is another place PGRs cut costs.

Twice as nice

Perhaps the newest product on the market is Legacy, a combination of Primo (trinexapac-ethyl + flurprimidol) and Cutless (flurprimidol). SePRO introduced it last May. Legacy is labeled for golf courses (not landscape use), although Storey says the company expects to expand the label.

Legacy acts two ways on the plant cycle, one early and one late. The result, research says, is enhanced suppression, better color and about a week's extra activity. In addition, Storey says the "rebound" effect noted with Primo alone is eliminated. Cutless works on the roots, Primo on the leaf.

Because PGRs slow down turf growth, lawn pros can realize significant savings in fuel costs, labor reduction and/or reallocation for other tasks. Plus, their mowing equipment will work more efficiently and last longer, says Shepard, adding that PGRs make even more economic sense where the lawn care pro has contracted for the mowing and landscape maintenance operation.

PGRs also can help lawn maintenance companies expand their customer bases. Cool-season turf species like tall fescue and Kentucky bluegrass grow very fast in the spring, and it is a challenge to keep up with the mowing. PGRs can be used to manage the growth during the spring, and turf growth will slow as the temperatures warm.

"In the North, one or two applications will greatly reduce unsightly Poa annua seedheads in the spring," says Don Myers, product development manager for herbicides and PGRs with Bayer Environmental Science.

While Bayer's Proxy is known in turf-grass for seedhead suppression, the company has another product in the wings for use on trees and hedges. It has been registered by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, but has not yet been

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MAKING PGRs PROFITABLE

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released. While it first will be targeted at the nursery business, the material likely will see use in the T&O area.

"I think it could be of value in a landscaping situation," Myers says. "If you didn't have to prune hedges and could get a more restrictive growth pattern with less labor, it would be worth considering."

Success in the South

Southern landscapers do a lot of ornamental trim work — sometimes twice a month. A PGR can cut the number of trips for a Southeastern landscaper by 30% to 50%, says Storey.

"Think of what you save in terms of labor, travel, fuel costs and new

Protecting our PGR tools

All eyes in the landscaping world continue to be on Ontario, Canada, where herbicide and pesticide use on landscapes has been severely curtailed.

"Ontario will have ratty lawns with dandelions," notes Bayer's Don Myers. "Will that be acceptable? If the public will not tolerate that look, then we will get push-back."

Perhaps of greater concern is the use of generic products, including plant growth regulators (PGRs).

"This is a great challenge for manufacturers," Myers says. "Short-term, landscapers will be happy with cheaper product — if it performs equally. In many cases, however, it will not."

Pests become resistant to older materials, he points out, plus "when you hamper the profits of basic manufacturers, you will have a negative effect on new chemical development." — C.H.



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opportunity to do other business," Storey says.

"Most LCOs want to slow turf growth to reduce mowing and clippings," says Shepard, noting several areas of the U.S. have limits on "green waste" going to landfills.

But because PGRs can be especially sensitive to the weather, geography and timing of application, some applicators simply are better at the art than others. How does one join the elite group?

Knowing the material's mode of action is one key to success. "It is important to know whether the PGR is taken up by the foliage or the roots," Shepard says.

PGR use in lawn care is not an area covered heavily in most states' license programs. "Go to the manufacturer," VanBibber recommends. "Co-workers in the industry are also good resources," Shepard adds.

"It's a good time for landscapers to try PRs as they need to cut labor and fuel expenses," VanBibber concludes. LHM

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