

Commercial Riders Reign Supreme



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When tackling a large mowing task, most contractors prefer to sit down on the job. To do the job, they prefer zero-turn mowers, according to sales figures compiled by the [Outdoor Power Equipment Institute](#) (OPEI).

OPEI says commercial riding mowers have experienced growth in every year since 2010, which it credits to increased innovations. Commercial riding mower shipments finished 2014 up 9.2 percent, or about 220,000 units—a record high—and continued momentum is expected through 2016. While a walk-behind mower serves contractors better in a confined area, “there aren’t too many places a riding mower can’t go,” says Mike Simmon, [Grasshopper](#)’s communication specialist. “Anytime you can mow faster than you can walk, you’re going to be more productive. You don’t have the fatigue or the stress on your joints from walking behind the machine all day. You can affect your speed and turning, which is the feathering of control levers right there at your lap where it’s real comfortable.”

Riding mowers are preferred for their higher ground speeds, which offer productivity gains, points out John Swanson, [Exmark](#) senior product manager. And, Roy Dust, commercial product specialist for [Briggs & Stratton](#), adds, “Most ride-ons are capable of at least a 30 percent increase in usable ground speed, some even more.”

Ergonomics, fuel efficiency and cut quality are the three biggest improvements in zero-turn mowers in recent years, says Simmon. Those align with the primary concerns of commercial and government sector end users, he adds. “Operators want to be comfortable on the machine while they are mowing, have good results when they are cutting and use as little fuel as possible,” he adds.

Innovations abound

Unitized pumps and wheel motors improve the durability and reliability of

zero-turn transmissions, says Nick Minas, [John Deere](#) commercial mowing product manager. "By eliminating many potential leak and failure points, customers can experience less downtime and potential damage resulting from hydraulic leaks," says Minas. "Mulch- On-Demand allows an operator to choose between side discharge and mulching through lever actuation, and is another advancement that increases productivity and efficiency." A more recent feature on some John Deere mowers is the option of MICHELIN X TWEEL TURF an airless radial tire designed to eliminate downtime caused by flat tires.

Dust says his company is now equipping Ferris mowers with integrated transmissions, a feature previously available on Snapper Pro models. Meanwhile, Exmark and Toro have included on-board intelligence systems to optimize machine life, maximize productivity and significantly increase fuel efficiency. Chris Hannan, Toro's marketing manager, says that innovations in its Z Master Series mowers include rear discharge cutting decks. Propane-powered models address the request for alternative fuels, and a bull-nose front bumper design protects the machine against frontal impacts.



Commercial riding mowers have experienced growth in every year since 2010, according to the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute. PHOTO: JOHN DEERE

Improved fuel efficiency without sacrificing power has been a recent focus, says Hannan. Kohler closed-loop EFI engines not only reduce fuel costs and CO2 emissions, but automatically adapt to load, weather, fuel and altitude changes for faster response and up to 25 percent better fuel economy. If it is fuel efficiency that professional cutters are looking for, they should also consider diesel-fueled models, says Simmon. "Diesel might cost more at the pump, but you're going to use considerably less of it and the cost per hour to operate the machine is going to go down significantly," he explains.

Reliability and operational efficiency (i.e. productivity) is what all professionals want foremost. "That's where the money is made, so they look for anything that will give them a more productive return, including usable ground speed, operator comfort, reliability and ease of maintenance," says Dust. "If the machine's down, it's not producing."

Cost of operation, including fuel costs, is important, as well. When manufacturers combine all three of these factors, offering dependable products with engines fueled with electronic fuel injection (EFI), propane or, most recently, an engine that combines the two fuel savers (the two new Kohler engines), contractors take notice.

EFI engines can provide up to a 25-percent increase in fuel economy based on application, says Minas. An EFI engine that runs on propane can boost the fuel savings to 40 percent, claims Kohler.

A comfortable ride



PHOTO: TORO

Whatever brand a contractor chooses, it must deliver a consistently clean cut as clients have come to expect that their properties remain pristine. A clean, manicured look is of the utmost importance, and many landscape contractors are looking to provide results while minimizing time-consuming activities such as blowing and collecting clippings, notes Hannan.

Integrated bagging systems enable longer mowing times and mulching options, he adds.

Simmon says the finished appearance of the grass is influenced by the airflow under the deck as well as blade choice. The goal is one-cut perfection, rather than having to go over an area more than once. "That has to do with whether you're just cutting and mowing, side discharge, mulching or collecting. Reducing the amount of time on a job maximizes the contractor's productivity," he says.

Deck size, horsepower, ergonomics and how the machine rides are other considerations in zero-turn mowers, says Brice Hill, Dixie Chopper product manager. Contractors should choose the right engine and deck combination, points out Minas.

With riding mower ergonomics, Swanson points out there are more areas upon which to focus than on a walk-behind because the operator sits on the machine. It's all about vibrations: vibrations to hands, vibrations to feet. Ergonomics is "a matter of doing the most that you can to make the operator comfortable by making it as natural as possible for him," notes Dust.

Buying Considerations

Keep these points in mind when making riding mower purchases.

Total cost of ownership: While diesel engines, for example, might have a higher upfront cost, they don't have maintenance factors such as spark plugs and offer more fuel efficiencies, Simmon notes. "Look at how much it will cost in time and money in oil changes, filter changes and greasing." Trade-in value may be better as well, he says.

One machine, many functions: A mower that accommodates other attachments saves on purchasing multiple pieces of machinery that sits idle throughout a few seasons, Simmon says.

Alternative fuel use: Propane is less expensive and more environmentally friendly, says Minas. Propane doesn't fall under restrictions in areas imposing "ozone days" or days where gas engine usage is regulated to mitigate emissions, he adds.

Serviceability: Focus on the machine components that do the work, notes Hill. If it's the deck, check out the spindles. Get an engine suitable for the application.

Dealer support: Downtime is money.

Being comfortable on the machine, thanks to air-ride and suspension seats, offers the operator the advantage of being “fresh, attentive and not thinking about how their back or knee hurts because of vibration in the foot rest,” Simmon says. “Operators demand comfortable seats, particularly air ride and suspension seats. You may not necessarily get those jobs done faster, but you are able to work more efficiently and effectively with an attention to detail that might increase productivity in increments that impact the job in a greater sense.”

More comfort translates into less fatigue, less fatigue minimizes accidents, Swanson points out. Padded armrests and adjustable seats are even being featured on many riding mowers.

Speaking of maintenance, some mowers come with electric deck lifts to enable operators to get under decks for easier maintenance when it comes to changing blades and installing mulching kits.

In addition to providing a comfortable ride, many manufacturers are taking action to protect the operator through roll-over protection systems, Hannan points out.

What's down the road for commercial riding mowers? Industry experts say to expect more fuel-efficiency improvements through alternative fuels, more availability of such fuels as propane, continued EFI integration and improved on-board fuel management.

Look for more power and less vibration in mowers, as well as more responsive transmissions that run cooler for extended maintenance life. Anything that helps landscape contractors provide better service, such as debris collection features, are on the table as well.