

# Maximize Your Mowing Fleet

The logo for Turf, featuring the word "Turf" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. A green grass blade graphic is integrated into the letter 'T'.The logo for Tree Services, featuring the words "Tree Services" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. A small green leaf graphic is above the 'e' in "Services". Below the main text is the tagline "Taking Tree Care to New Heights" in a smaller, italicized font.The logo for DesignBuild, featuring the word "Design" in a black, sans-serif font and "Build" in a bold, orange, sans-serif font. A small orange square graphic is above the 'i' in "Design".The logo for PLOW, featuring the word "PLOW" in a bold, blue, sans-serif font. The letters are slightly slanted to the right.

Source: [www.TurfMagazine.com](http://www.TurfMagazine.com)

Since the residential accounts for Mowing and More are all fairly similar with 4,000 to 6,000 square feet of turf to maintain, owner Chad Stern has perfected the necessary crew and mower makeup to meet his clients' needs.

Stern's company, based in Chevy Chase, Maryland, uses two-person crews to maximize operational efficiency so both employees are always busy on each job. Because job size is relatively small, his crews only use walk-behind mowers. Each crew has a 42-inch walk-behind, a 36- or 34-inch walk-behind, and a 21- to 30-inch trim mower on its trailer. Two crews mow full time all week (90 to 100 lawns), while one crew mows full time three days a week.

Before adding equipment or additional manpower to a crew for the year, Stern will forecast whether it can support additional lawns on its route. "The last time we added an entire mowing crew was two or three year ago," he says.



Lawn sizes vary from region to region. Consequently, the services that Tom Heaviland's Southern California company, Heaviland Landscape Management, provides to its customers differ markedly from those offered by Stern's Maryland operation. Heaviland Landscape Management services large commercial properties with land sizes that vary.

On a typical day, the company sends out 30 to 35 crews from its Vista, California, headquarters. Each three-person crew will have a 21-inch walk-behind mower on its trailer. With varying property sizes and turf expanses, certain crews will also have a mid-size 36- or 52-inch riding mower. But Heaviland's clients don't typically have large areas of turf to mow. The reason? "We have a lot of slopes, nothing is flat," Heaviland says, adding that slope work is more labor-intensive, making the use of large pieces of equipment impractical and requiring extensive use of handheld power equipment.

"We get a minimum of five years for a walk-behind mower because we just don't put the amount of hours on the mowers compared to contractors out East," says Heaviland. "We only mow 46 weeks a year depending on how much rain we get and how cold it gets."

The company must also prepare its crews for long droughts or too much rain. In fact, with the California weather, the company does a lot of low-volume irrigation and is reducing the overall amount of mowing on properties. "A lot of our clients are moving away from turf," Heaviland explains. "Companies are getting rebates for removing turf and other areas that are using more water."

Mowing and More, founded 15 years ago, and 30-year-old Heaviland Landscape Management have many years of practice determining the ideal crew and mower makeup for the work they perform on clients' properties. They've also become adept at reconfiguring their crews as conditions change. Many contractors, however, are still trying to figure out the ideal maintenance crew and equipment makeup to efficiently meet their customers' needs. They can only accomplish this by carefully examining the types and sizes of their clients' properties, the amount and variety of work that needs to be done on these sites and the types and sizes of equipment that will get the work done as efficiently as possible. Complicating matters, clients needs and wants sometimes change.



## **Right-size your crews**

There is no right or wrong way to decide how crews and their equipment should be structured, says Mike Simmon, communications specialist with The Grasshopper Co., Moundridge, Kansas. "There is no equation that helps a contractor figure this out; every contractor is unique," he says. "Two companies could have the same number of people but different work, therefore crew size, mowers and equipment will be different."

The ideal goal when creating crew size is maximizing efficiency. This typically involves a lot of trial and error, but always starts by measuring. Yes, measuring. Measure everything, including man-hours, hours bid and hours actually used. Measure objectively and in line with calculable goals, advises Jim Huston of Colorado-based J.R. Huston Consulting, who has been helping green industry contractors for 28 years. By measuring, a contractor can constantly improve the company's overall proficiency. "You can't manage what you don't measure, so measure everything," he stresses.



Mowing and More in Chevy Chase, Maryland, uses two-person mowing crews and equips each crew with mowers and equipment to meet each property's maintenance needs.

PHOTOS: ISTOCKPHOTO.COM AND GRASSHOPPER

Ninety percent of contractors who care for commercial properties say a three-to five-person crew is optimal, depending on the size of the property and the types of services performed, Huston says. For residential, most contractors

say the optimal maintenance crew has two people. "Typically, if you put more than two people on a residential crew, the third person doesn't have enough to do and won't be productive," Huston says.

## **Mower Replacement Time**

Mowing and More had a primary mower that was reaching 1,000 to 1,200 hours, or about 75 percent of the mower's useful life.

Issues were beginning to arise. The mower deck had some rust and structural problems. Instead of waiting until the mower broke down and time was wasted, owner Chad Stern says he was proactive and went out to purchase a new one. He didn't want to end up in a position where he had to rush to make a purchasing decision for a new mower. Today, the older mower is kept as a backup in case anything happens to another mower.

The life of a mower is based on the hours it is running. The average useful life of a commercial walk-behind or zero-turn mower is about 100 hours per horsepower, says Stern and Jim Huston, a green industry business consultant. For example, if a mower is running at 20 hp, then it's useful life would be about 2,000 hours, according to Huston.

One way to know a piece of equipment's hours is to log its use every time or to have an hour meter on the equipment.

Typically, selling the mower at 75 percent of its useful life before it reaches that 2,000-hour mark is wise, Huston advises. "By selling at 75 percent of the mowers useful life," he says, "the contractor will also have gotten rid of the mower at a time when he can get maximum value and before major repairs became necessary."

## **The "art" of mower selection**

Ensuring each crew is equipped with the right machines and tools starts with understanding the work involved and what kind of mower fleet will help get that work done efficiently.

Today's mowers are faster, more maneuverable and more productive than they've ever been before. "Equipment is evolving and changing so much. There has been tremendous improvement in mower standards in just the last 10 to 15 years," says Huston. With so many choices—deck sizes, fuel choices, out-front vs. mid-mount, zero-turn vs. stander vs. walk-behind, etc.—contractors have to do their homework to purchase the most productive mowers they can for the properties they maintain.

For most mowing jobs the logical choice is to use the largest cutting deck width the job site will allow to increase the production rate, Simmon advises. Crews that carry a wide variety of mowers they don't need require larger trailers and can lose efficiency, he adds.



When choosing between mid-mount and front-mount mowers, for example, contractors must factor in the type of work they are performing on the customers' properties. Simmon says a mid-mount is often a better option for open areas without a lot of trees or fences, areas such as municipal or industrial parks. A front-mount mower deck may be more productive for properties with tighter spaces and more obstacles to mow around. The goal on these types of properties is to reduce the amount of secondary trimming, says Simmon. Walking and using a hand-held trimmer takes extra time.

[Read Fuel Up for Cost Savings](#)

## **Maintenance to keep them runnin'**

Also, contractors should evaluate the cost of ownership over the useful life of each mower versus the cost of the mower's acquisition, Simmon advises. "It's not how much a mower will cost up front that matters most, but the long-term costs of that piece of equipment, which include fuel and maintenance, as well as the time it takes to maintain it." Contractors should purchase mowers (or any pieces of equipment) that are reliable and easy to maintain. Keeping the blades spinning (i.e. reducing downtime) keeps crews busy, and maximizes billable hours, adds Huston.

Every contractor should systemize mower purchases, maintenance and repairs. Mowers, in many instances, are contractors' biggest and most reliable moneymakers. They must provide consistent and reliable service hour after hour, day after day.



When choosing between mid-mount and front-mount mowers, factor in the type of work they are performing. A mid-mount is better for open areas without a lot of obstacles, whereas a front-mount is more productive for properties with tighter spaces and more obstacles to mow around. PHOTO: MOWING AND MORE

Whether or not a company has an in-house mechanic or sends machines out to dealers for repairs, the contractor must develop a system to maintain service their equipment to minimize the possibility of breakdowns and lost production time, Simmon stresses. The system can start with a simple Excel sheet to monitor vehicle usage, maintenance, repairs and downtime. The records must be updated regularly and, at the minimum, must include the number of hours each unit is being used, maintenance activities for each unit and the repair frequency and cost for each mower.

Simmon says contractors may also want to investigate ways they can use their mowers year-round. Some types of mowers can be fitted with other work tools. Attachments, such as blades or snow blowers, for example, can contribute to the usefulness of the machine year-round.

*COVER PHOTO: GRASSHOPPER*