

Win the Game of Mower Selection



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A lawn mower serves one purpose and one purpose only: make tall grass shorter. For most DIY grass cutters that's all they expect. If only it was that simple for professional cutters. That's because cutting grass is the major moneymaker for tens of thousands of you. It's your business. It's your livelihood. It's what you count on to send your kids to college, fund your retirement and put bread on your employees' tables.

As most of you know, making money as a professional grass cutter isn't as simple as it sounds. And it starts with the most basic decision you must make: selecting mowing equipment that gives you the best chance to succeed. Obviously, you will need the most productive and reliable machines for your company, given the markets and the particular mix of clients you service.

The selection process is hardly easier for those of you not depending on mowing as your top revenue producer. Many of you offer a full complement of property management services and rely upon higher- margin services, and not mowing, to make your nut.

Sometimes you must mow because your clients expect it. Who wants to disappoint clients or allow other service providers to get a foothold on the properties you service?

"Mowing is one of those core services you do if you are in the landscape industry. It's that service that ties everything together and keeps you on properties eight, nine or 10 months a year," says Chris James, founder and owner of [Chris James Landscaping](#) in Waldwick, New Jersey. "Most clients in our market don't want to call three or four companies to get all of the work done on their properties."

Regardless of which camp you reside in – mowing as your main income producer or mowing as one of many services you provide – cutting grass "must be profitable" at some level, says James.

Two huge factors determine the price you can charge for mowing: fierce competition from thousands of small operators with low overhead on one end of the service spectrum, and large, highly efficient, systems-driven mowing/maintenance companies populate the other.

The perception held by many property owners and managers is that mowing, in spite of being a service they can't do without, is a commodity. Price too often drives their buying decisions. Why else the oft-repeated lament within the industry, "Prices haven't gone up in years. We can't raise our prices!"



Stephen Palmer of ABC Lawn Services uses electric mowers on most of his residential jobs.

Mix of properties, mix of mowers

Chris James Landscaping operates around Bergen County in northern New Jersey. The firm offers a complete palette of landscape services to owner-occupied and single-tenant properties. Many of the firm's middle class to affluent clients commute the short distance to New York City each day.

Because the company serves both commercial and residential clients, it mows both large and small properties. Thus, Chris James Landscaping maintains and uses a varied fleet of cutting equipment.

"We service quarter-acre lots up to 4 or 6 acres of grass. The crew that's going to the bigger properties will have two 52s (52-inch Scag stand-on machines) on a trailer or in a box truck that particular day," says James.

On most mowing jobs, however (especially residential properties), a crew will leave the company yard with a 21-inch trim mower, either a 52- or 48-inch walk-behind and, in some instances, a 52-inch stander.

The New Jersey company standardized its equipment fleet with Scag units. Standardization allows for more efficient maintenance and mower repairs, says James. It also provides his company with backup mowers that can be pressed into service or, if need be, "cannibalized" should one of his firm's daily cutters suffer a parts failure.

James takes the cautious approach when replacing mowers. In most cases, he will keep a mower a year or so after making an engine replacement on it. Then he sells it. His company replaces two or three of its older machines each year with new units.

"I don't want to wake up one day and find out I need to buy \$35,000 to \$40,000 worth of new mowers," explains James. "The way we do it, we will have replaced every mower within three or four years anyway. It's how we budget; it's part of our process."

Serious firepower for small lawns

Kevin Rantanen is the owner of [Perrysburg Lawn and Landscape](#) in Perrysburg, Ohio, a rapidly growing middle-class suburb southeast of Toledo. Rantanen, a

life-long resident and former city councilman, started his company in 2000. During this past season he oversaw three mowing and two landscaping crews.

Perrysburg Lawn and Landscape services mostly homeowners' lawns, although it does maintain several larger commercial properties, too. His crews mow 245 properties a week, very few as much as a mile outside of the Google map service area of his and a neighboring community. Most of the home lawns he mows are a quarter to a half-acre in size.

In spite of the small size of the properties, Rantanen employs serious firepower in the 22 to 24 mowing visits his guys make each season to each account. His employees, depending on the day's routes, load their Isuzu cab-over service trucks with a combination of 61-inch Grasshopper 325Ds, 60-inch-cut Exmark Lazer zero riders, 36-inch Exmark hydros and 30-inch Exmark walk-behinds with sulkies.

One year he bought two commercial stand-on units thinking they would boost his company's performance. When he didn't see any difference in production he sold them. "You can only go so fast on a small residential yard and some customers think you're going too fast anyway," says Rantanen.

This past fall, Rantanen purchased a 5-acre property several miles from his company's present location. He says if he can attract more employees prior to spring he will likely buy more mowers – used equipment if he can find well-maintained commercial units with 300 to 500 hours.

Liking electric but backing up with gas



Chris James Landscaping uses mostly Scag mowers to simplify maintenance and repairs.

Stephen Palmer is hedging his bets when it comes to his choice of commercial mowers for his small landscape company. And it's working for him on the several hundred properties he mows and maintains in far northeast Florida. Palmer uses both battery- and gas-powered commercial mowers in his ABC Lawn Services in Orange Park, Florida, located just southwest of Jacksonville. Most of the clients of his 13-year-old company are homeowners.

His fleet consists of three Mean Green battery-powered units – two 33-inch walk behinds and a 48-inch ZTR – and three Gravely gas-powered commercial mowers with 34-inch, 44-inch and 52-inch decks respectively.

His eight employees generally use electric mowers for day-to-day residential mowing. "The biggest compliment I get from my clients is about how quiet our mowing is," says Palmer. "But, when we get into super thick yards, what I call cleanups that haven't been mowed regularly, we use the gas mowers."

Palmer admits he "took a leap of faith" in buying his first battery-powered cutting unit, a 33-inch, Mean Green walk-behind.

"I bought it without testing it and sight unseen. One of my small gas mowers

had just crapped out. A lot of yards have small gates and I needed something small to get through them," he recalls.

He bought that initial lithium ion mower due to his experience using STIHL battery-powered hedge and string trimmers. He uses a power inverter he installed in the cab of one of his service vehicles to keep a charged battery available. The Stihl battery handhelds resulted in a substantial savings in gasoline and two-cycle oil.

He hoped for similar performance and even greater gas savings when he bought his first battery-powered mower. He says he wasn't disappointed. Today he owns two 33-inch battery-powered walk behinds and a 48-inch Mean Green ZTR.

Although the initial price of the Mean Green ZTR was substantially higher than a similar-sized gas-powered cutter, Palmer says the savings in gasoline and items such as belts, clutches, carburetors and not having hydraulic issues have almost made up the difference in cost after three years of use.

He has put about 1,300 hours on his 48-inch Mean Green and the mower, powered by its two rechargeable batteries, continues to perform excellently, he claims. That's not to say there hasn't been issues, but they've been easily solvable, says Palmer.

He also likes that they're lighter than similarly sized gas mowers. This means less fuel and wear and tear on his F250 service trucks.