

The Future Of The Equipment Industry



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Equipment is an integral part of a landscape contractor's work ... and a hot topic of conversation whenever they gather. The [Outdoor Power Equipment Institute](#) (OPEI) held its 65th annual meeting in June in Kohler, Wisconsin, where equipment manufacturers and suppliers discussed the many trends and issues impacting the outdoor power equipment industry. Here's what they had to share.

Innovation

A key conversation at the OPEI annual meeting focused on technological changes and innovation in the marketplace, specifically the diversification of power sources.

"Growth in alternative power – as well as improvements to traditional power sources – is a trend that will continue," says Dan Ariens, chairman and CEO of the [Ariens Co.](#) and current chair of the OPEI board of directors. "The diversity of power supply will make the equipment product offering look very different than it did even a few years ago. The user interface of equipment will become more important as technology migrates into the equipment segment. It remains to be seen what impact the new generation of homeowners will have on equipment but it is starting to show up in features and overall product design. The strength of the economy (housing starts, job growth, etc.) has caused both residential and commercial consumers to be more interested in innovations that make it easier to use or maintain equipment. When economic confidence is high, both groups have a mindset geared toward 'trading up' and products that provide a newer, easier solution will have a broader market than in previous years. Customers will have more reasons from manufacturers to purchase a new model."

Propane power was also a growing trend OPEI members discussed. According to Jeremy Wishart, the [Propane Industry Education and Research Council's](#) deputy director of business development, "acceptance of propane power in the

industry has come a long way in a relatively short time when you consider the number of propane mower models offered by outdoor equipment manufacturers and the number of contractors choosing to operate propane machines compared to a few years ago.”

Recent research commissioned by the Propane Education & Research Council was clear in its findings: More commercial landscapers will power their mower fleets with propane in the near future.

This past summer, at least 15,000 commercial propane mowers were in operation across the country. More than 135 propane mower models are now produced by 12 manufacturers in a variety of zero-turn, wide-area walk behind and stand-on units.

A newer trend – electric power – was next on the agenda.

“Most anyone will agree, electric mowers are the future of mowing. It is no longer a matter of if, but when,” says Joe Conrad, president and founder of [Mean Green Products](#). “Many industry leaders would surely agree that when electric mowers are within 25 percent of the initial purchase price of a comparable ICE mower, most everyone will be forced to switch to electric in order to compete with the low operating costs. We are quickly closing in on that number and several factors such as new federal tax credits looming on the horizon could, literally, put electric mowers to the forefront of the mowing industry overnight.”

Another key conversation among OPEI members at the annual meeting focused on the growth of robotic equipment.



“Robotics and alternative power sources are significant issues that will dramatically affect the industry in the coming years,” says Kris Kiser, OPEI’s president. “Several of our members have introduced robotic mowers, and more will be bringing them to market in the future. Robotic mowers are going to be a significant part of the industry going forward.”

To address the anticipated growth of this segment, OPEI established a robotic mower standards committee specifically to develop the first-ever ANSI/OPEI safety standard for robotic mowers in the U.S. The association serves as the outdoor power equipment industry’s recognized safety standards development organization. Currently, OPEI has 17 active safety standards for other equipment, including multiple power sources.

“Our association’s strength is our member’s engagement, and OPEI is successful when it’s able to pull its members together and address industry challenges together,” Kiser says. “Manufacturers are adapting to a changing regulatory environment, and the industry is always evolving to adapt to consumers’ needs and tastes, as well as comply with ever-evolving governmental regulatory requirements, both at the federal and state level.”

Technology is rapidly advancing

Technological innovation is at its peak right now and getting more and more reliable, according to Rajesh Joshi, product marketing director for turf and RTV at [Kubota](#). The landscape industry will be impacted by these technologies just as many others already are.

“On the hardware side, battery and sensor costs are significantly down, data storage is cheaper and overall packages are getting smaller in size and easier to fit into current equipment without significant redesigns,” Joshi says. “On the software side, there are canned data analysis and apps more readily available and customizable for customers and companies to help use the data in meaningful ways to improve reliability. The winners will be the ones that can use technology and transform the data to enable operators to lower their operating costs without any sophisticated additional means.”

Some manufacturers have been investing in autonomous and smart technologies combining this with consumer insights to develop new products.

“The winners of tomorrow will be the companies that understand the needs of their product users intimately, serve them well over the entire life of the products and provide added value with innovation that matters,” says Jean Hlay, president and chief operating officer of [MTD Products Inc.](#)

More productivity

Productivity is still king in the landscape professional’s mind, says Tom Vachal, Kubota’s senior product manager.

“Landscape professionals are looking for durability and performance,” he says. “Ease of use is very important for landscape companies with larger fleets as their operator pool is transient.”

Vachal sites products with new technology that allow for less demand on engine torque and better ground speed, all for the purpose of enhancing productivity.

Other innovations for improving efficiency include management information systems that allow supervisors and managers access to work planning, scheduling and performance on their phones or tablets, says Steve Booher, founder & CEO of [Smart Guided Systems](#).

Other advancements reduce maintenance, therefore maximizing equipment use on the job. One example is mower blades that don’t require sharpening; they sharpen themselves as they cut, wearing away old material and exposing a new, sharper blade edge, explains Andy Stupp, vice president of [Fisher Barton](#).

What to expect

Advancing technology is moving business and the equipment industry at warp speed these days, and the industry can expect this to continue. While no one knows exactly what will come in 10 years, it’s certain the foreseeable future

will bring better and more innovative equipment.