

RIDING ROTARY MOWER SELECTION:

Making the Cut

By Peter Whurr

Deciding on the type of mower best-suited to your specific needs can be difficult and even confusing. You want a unit that will make your crew productive. It should be versatile, reliable and easy to maintain. It should fit into your budget. The choices are almost limitless.

In the proper environment, riding rotary mowers can improve cutting time-efficiency and productivity over their walk-behind counterparts. Reel mowers deliver the highest cutting quality — the kind demanded in many sports turf situations — and will never be obsolete, but rotary mower cutting has improved over the years to the point where it's worth considering for athletic fields. Plus, rotary mowers are extremely versatile.

These and other factors account for the increase in rotary mower popularity among professional turf managers, as well as the industry trend toward units with larger mowing decks. While the norm is still in the 36-inch-plus range, decks of more than 100 inches are becoming more popular and available for the riding mower market.

Fundamental Decision Factors

Ultimately, the primary advantage of having large, multiblade decks on a riding rotary mower is improved productivity. A wider cutting swath reduces the number of "passes" required to cut a given turf area. However, keep in mind that a larger unit can be less maneuverable in tight spaces. In confined areas, walk-behind may be more efficient.

Versatility is another factor to consider in your decision. Determining how and where the unit will be used is crucial.

Will it be used solely on sports fields? Will it be used for cutting in parks and other green spaces? Will it have to work around landscaped areas? Tractor units, which accept a variety of attachments, are something to consider if the mower will be used in multiple applications.

Whereas "dedicated" mowers, those with the cutting deck permanently attached, are designed exclusively for mowing, tractor units are not.

Features to Keep in Mind

After defining your work demands, consider the size of the engine the unit will require to do the job. An underpowered rotary riding mower can be inefficient, which could defeat the purpose of a substantial financial investment. While your dealer or manufacturer can offer suggestions and information regarding needed horsepower for your situation, be ready to ask questions regarding engine options, cooling systems, drive systems, and so on.

The engine is the heart and soul of any mower, so choose it wisely. Many manufacturers offer an array of engine choices: air-cooled or liquid-cooled, gasoline or diesel. In general, diesel engines are the most economical to operate. They tend to last longer and are better-suited to heavy-use applications.

When considering engine options, check out:

- Transport speed. How quickly can the mower move from site to site?
- Cutting speed. This is generally measured in acres per hour.

These two factors help determine overall productivity of the unit.

Operating terrain should also be taken into account in the rotary rider mower selection process. Hilly or undulating sites might warrant a four-wheel-drive machine, roll-over protection, and heavy-duty parking brakes. The mower's turning radius and number of cutting decks should be considered, particularly if the unit will work around trees, shrubs and planting beds.

High-flotation tires are yet another consideration. They decrease soil compaction and, combined with sturdy springs and shock absorbers, enhance operator comfort. Fatigued operators are less productive. An adequately padded seat and easy-to-reach controls can also help reduce operator fatigue.

Simple routine maintenance, such as oil, oil filter and air filter changes and cleaning, is one of the main ingredients for long-term product reliability. The easier these tasks are to be performed, the more likely it is they will be. That means accessibility to key routine service points is crucial. Design simplicity makes maintenance and in-house repairs easy.

Occasionally, a repair may require the dealer or manufacturer. Conveniently located dealer service departments and the availability of warranties and service contracts can be worth their weight in gold if your riding rotary mower needs major repairs.

Clipping collection is another point to consider. A number of riding rotary mowers feature optional grass catchers. This feature is valuable as long as you have a place to dispose of the gathered clippings. However, since the trend with landfills nationwide is to refuse green waste, you may want to look at other options, such as mulching and composting.

At sports turf facilities, grass clippings have traditionally been left on the ground after cutting, provided the facility is mowed often enough so that no more than 20 percent of the grass blade is cut off at one time. This process will naturally fertilize the soil, without significantly contributing to thatch.

The purchase of any piece of equipment should be seen as a long-term investment. In the case of a riding rotary mower that investment can be substantial. Ask other sports turf managers about their riding rotary mowers. Ask the dealer in your area for referrals, and use them to gather knowledge. The few hours you spend researching before you buy can amount to months and even years of riding rotary mower performance and productivity. □

Editor's note: Peter Whurr is the product manager for Ransomes America Corporation.