



Fellow workers usually have valuable information about mowers, so they should be involved with the decision-making process from the start.

Mower Selection Guide

By Angelo Ranieri

It seems like just yesterday we were picking rocks and seeding an area to make a field for the students to play on. My, how things have changed since then.

When I first started in this profession, a strong back and a tough seat that could endure sitting on a mower for eight hours a day were all you needed. Today you need a computer and a college degree to grow grass. Thatch management, grass types, fertilizer percentages, herbicides, aeration, liability, sports injury prevention, and on and on have my head a-whirling — even buying a mower takes a specialist.

Does this sound familiar? Just think about this for a moment: Just as you did, some of the people you work with have been with you for many years and have had to face the challenges of change head-on by gaining knowledge and learning skills they never imagined. Change, I'm sure, caused them anxious moments as it did you. You conquered the challenges and became the specialist you are today, the specialist who is about to select a new mower.

Providing guidelines and suggestions to you about making your selec-

tions is causing me some anxiety, because what I'm about to discuss is certainly not new to you. For instance, the fact that there are riding mowers with mower attachments that mount on the front, middle and rear and that have rotary, reel, or flail cutting devices driven by hydraulic motors, belts or shafts on frames that have three or four wheels and two- and four-wheel drive, with gas or diesel engines, is not something I need to tell you. What I'd like to do is share experiences that may make the selection from this equipment menu easier and to help you select a mower that you can live with for many years.

I want to share a discussion on the selection process more so than on comparing the features, attachments or specifications. The process is comprised of six important elements: (1) selecting a team, (2) funding, (3) function, (4) testing or trying, (5) evaluating, and (6) selecting.

Selecting a Team

Those involved in the process are the most important criteria in selecting a new mower. You can select the new mower on your own. You have the ability, and if you have the authority, why not go ahead and buy a new mower that you or your staff will use? I'll tell you why.

How many times have you been working for someone who provided you with everything you needed to do the job, someone who, perhaps, sat in an office and never did your job? Or better yet, have you ever worked for people who worked their way up through the ranks and know all there is to know about the job and selected all the equipment without asking your opinion? How did you feel about the tools and supplies that were afforded you? Like most people in this position, you probably felt the items were inferior in quality and a waste of money. You probably complained because no one asked your opinion about the tools or equipment you had to use.

I am responsible for keeping my department supplied with everything it needs, but I don't select or recommend one single thing. I practice shared decision making and bottom-up management. I make sure my staff gets involved, knows the process, provides input, tests, compares and makes the final recommendation. You should too. Together, you and your staff or you and your fellow workers have numerous combined years of experience, training, and exposure to all sorts of equipment that will enable you to make the best selection as a team. Let your fellow workers help

right from the start. Ownership of the decision then becomes everyone's, and the mower selected will be acceptable to everyone even if it is a compromise because of finances.

Funding

Once the selection team is established, discussions in regard to the selection should begin with the funding. Let everyone know how much money is available to be spent on a new mower and if a piece of equipment you now have will be used as a trade-in.

But this is not *always* the way it works. Sometimes it is necessary to work a little backwards. I work for a public school district. I ask my staff to select a mower and then find out what it costs so I can include the amount in my budget for approval by the school board and then by vote of the taxpayers.

Function

Discuss and agree on what the new mower will be used for. Determine the field or fields or lawns it will be used for and whether or not it should just be a mower.

We have a tractor that has a mower attachment, post-hole driller, york rake, rotary brush, front-end loader and diamond drag. Changing from one attachment to the other is easy; we don't have numerous tractors to maintain, and we have versatility in one piece of equipment that we can use all year long in a part of the country that has (in my opinion) ten months of winter.

We also have a mower with an eleven-foot cut that only can be used to mow. We decided on this mower rather than replacing our smaller mowers because it saved man-hours and was less costly than hiring another person whose time could not be justified in the winter. So function was justified by the economics.

As an aside, we share use of fields with the towns in our area. With the purchase of the eleven-foot mower, we have entered into an agreement by which we share services. We mow fields for the towns, and they plow snow for us. It saved us from buying more plows and them from buying a new mower. The taxpayers saved all around.

Testing

Once you know how much you have to spend and you agree on what the piece of equipment will be used for, you can seriously begin the search process. You might begin by going directly to the yellow pages of your phone book or some other directory to develop a list of dealers to call to demonstrate their equipment. Limit your list to commercial grade equipment. This is much more efficient and practical than visiting them. Ask them to bring literature about the mowers they demonstrate, including available options, attachments, specifications and warranty.

Prior to the demonstrations, mow a particular area with the mower you have and make note of the time it takes to do so. It is also advisable to calculate the size of the area cut. Then when demonstrations take place, you can either cut the test area or an area of similar size to compare mowing time.

As I mentioned above, the eleven-foot mower we bought saved so many man-hours, it was not necessary to ask the board to hire another person. This helped persuade the board to include the purchase of the mower in my budget.

Mow a section of a field with your mower and right next to that portion mow with the demonstrator to compare the quality of the cut. Let everyone on the selection team operate the mower. See how it maneuvers, how loud it is, how it

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Mowers

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cuts, all the obvious things. Immediately after the demonstration, meet to discuss the demonstrations and make notes of each person's opinions and observations. Conduct as many demonstrations as you feel are adequate. As demonstrations progress, the criteria that will be used to select the mower will develop and be refined.

Evaluating

When the demonstrations have been completed, it is time to evaluate and compare the mowers you tried. The criteria you want to compare is a combination of what the team developed and information taken from the many brochures you accumulated from the dealers.

Look at the specifications section, and from all of this, develop a spread sheet listing the specifications along the top of the page plus your criteria and listing the brands down the left side. It then becomes easier to see which mower has what.



Prior to demonstrations, mow a particular area with the mower you have and make note of the time it takes.



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For instance, along the top of the sheet you might list horsepower, transmission type, ground speed, turning radius, service intervals and other pertinent information. As you work your way through each brand, you will be able easily to compare between the different mowers.

You will by this time have formed opinions as to what features are really desirable to have and which are not. You will have an idea of which mower you think might be the best to purchase. During the demonstrations you may find a mower you really like with features which surpass all others. If so and you feel you would like to purchase that mower, ask yourself if you really need the extra whistles and bells. Don't let emotions over-rule logic in making a selection or making recommendations. Narrow your field to three mowers.

Selection

Here is the final and most difficult task of the process — narrowing the list to one mower. Your team has done an excellent job up to this point, and there is

One thing I suggest at this point is to use one more tool that is at your disposal to help reach your final decision — consult with your counterparts.

consensus on everything done to this point. There is also a high level of anxiety.

The anxiety needs to be relieved in order to conclude this process comfortably. One thing I suggest at this point is to use one more tool that is at your

disposal to help reach your final decision — consult with your counterparts. This in no way is meant to suggest that the team cannot make the final decision, but is meant to reinforce the work the team has done and provide information not usually obtainable during demonstrations.

Ask your counterparts what they use and why. Ask them if they ever had one of the mowers you are considering and if it performed well. They can provide information about the service, the dealer, the problems with the mower, and so forth that the demonstration and comparison of criteria will never divulge.

You are now well prepared to choose the one mower that you will live with for many years. Good luck to you and your team! □

Angelo Ranieri is director of facilities for Susquehanna Valley Central School District in Conklin, NY.



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