

Reel mowers covering more real estate

Homeowners tout Earth-friendly benefits, ease of operation

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Going green can be as simple as taking a walk in the yard.



PATRICK KASTNERDISPATCH

That's if you're also pushing a reel lawn mower instead of following a gas-consuming power model.

Gas mowers emit as much air pollution in one hour as a car does when driven 100 miles, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. With more than 30 million lawn mowers in the nation, that's a big carbon footprint.

The old-fashioned manual, reel lawn mower, on the other hand, "is so ecologically cool," said Warren Bartholomew, a connoisseur of reel mowers who services them -- as well as gas mowers and other garden equipment -- at his Arlington Service shop, 5019 N. High St.

The only carbon emitted -- once the mower has been built -- comes from the carbon dioxide that the user breathes out while getting a mild aerobic workout.

"And it's economical to maintain these things," Bartholomew said. "The most you need to do is sharpen them once a year."

Many manufacturers and users say that reel mowers are better for the lawn, too, because they cut like scissors instead of tearing the grass as rotary mowers do.

Interest in reel and other environmentally friendly mowers has grown steadily the past few years, "especially with the recent surge in gas prices," said Gretchen Heine, a spokeswoman for Sunlawn mowers, which has manufactured alternatives to gas-powered lawn mowers since 1997 with its line of German-engineered manual and electric mowers.

Although gas mowers use relatively little fuel, the increase in fuel prices combined with "the attention on eco-friendly products in the past year or two" have produced "a slowly growing trend," Heine said.

Part of the reason for the uptick in interest is that reel mowers, while classic in design and durable enough to last a lifetime, have been improved from the models that many people remember their fathers or grandfathers sweating over.

Most significant, they're lighter. Even the large, wide models top out at about 30 pounds, and some of the latest-generation mowers, such as the Brill Razor, weigh 17 pounds. Lars Hundley, president of Clean Air Gardening, one of many Web-based reel-mower companies, remembers when he bought his first reel lawn mower in 1997.

"I started pushing it around the yard, and I was blown away. The mower not only worked, but it worked pretty well, and it wasn't even hard to push."

Jennifer Heller of Clintonville bought her first reel mower 15 years ago at a garage sale and, after wearing out that model, purchased a new one about three years ago.

"I love it," she said. "It's wonderful. It's quiet, and it doesn't stink, and I get a workout. And I can have my dog in the yard when I do it. It doesn't kick rocks like motors do, and I know I'm doing something good for the environment."

Bill Catus also appreciates the eco-friendly aspect of reel mowers.

"It was a form of exercise, which is good," the Clintonville resident said, "and secondly, the typical gas lawn-mower engine causes substantial pollution and carbon dioxide emission."

"They may have gotten better, but grunting out there while pushing the (manual) mower is more environmentally sound."

When buying a reel mower, advice is usually more common sense than digital-age. The blade bed, for instance, should be flat and wide enough for a nice scissor-cutting action from the revolving blades, which are usually the same width as power mowers', 20 inches.

And the reel should include five or more blades so that when it spins, the cuts come quickly and efficiently.

Alice Faryna of Upper Arlington, who bought a reel mower in 1998 when she moved into a town house that had a small lawn, also offered this advice to new owners: "Don't clip it (the lawn) too close. You'll have more weeds, and the soil will dry out faster."

And, "You have to take a bit of kidding from your neighbors, but that's OK."

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Buying, maintenance tips

Reel mowers can be purchased online or at most big-box retailers and hardware stores, including Ace Hardware stores, Home Depot, Meijer, Sears, Target, True Value Hardware stores and Wal-Mart.

Prices range from \$89.99 for the Sears Craftsman 16-inch Cut Path Reel Mower to \$250 for top-end models such as the Brill RazorCut 38 Premium Manual Push Reel Mower, "the Mercedes of reel lawn mowers," said Lars Hundley of Clean Air Gardening. It weighs no more than 17 pounds and has flame-hardened steel blades designed to reduce friction.

And, if money is no object, there is the Putting Green Reel Mower that retails for \$1,299.99 and features an 11-blade computer-balanced reel that boasts a professional golf-course quality cut.

Here are tips for using a reel mower:

- *Perform maintenance.* Get the blades and blade bed sharpened once a year or once every other year, depending on usage.

"It just needs to be sharpened like a pair of scissors," said Warren

Bartholomew of Arlington Service.

- *Clear lawn debris.* Pick up sticks and such before mowing. The material can block the rolling drum blade.

- *Mow frequently.* Reel mowers simply roll over high grass and tall weeds without cutting them.

"If the grass is high (3 to 4 inches or more) you can make the transition easier on both yourself and your lawn by adjusting the height in two steps," said Gretchen Heine of Sunlawn Mowers. "You may even want to mow once more with a power mower, bagging the clippings to remove the excess mass. Then the next day, mow with your (manual) mower."

- *Go Zen: Be the mower.* "With a manual reel mower, you are the engine," Hundley said. "The faster you walk, the faster the blade turns. So get moving at a comfortably quick walking pace, and you'll get the best results."

- *Be realistic.* Manual mowers aren't for larger acreage.

"They're just not suited for three-quarters of an acre of rolling green," Bartholomew said, "although I did have a customer who had a big yard like that, and he owned three of them. This guy was in real good shape."

- *Be patient.* If it took 45 minutes with a power mower, then it should take an hour with a manual mower.

"That's the beauty of a reel mower," Bartholomew said. "You really get involved with your yard. It's part of a ritual of manicuring your yard, unlike the power mower. The plus side is, after four or five weeks, the yard does look like a putting green. It looks beautiful."

"And it's economical to maintain these things. The most you need to do is sharpen them once a year."

Warren Bartholomew
Arlington Service operator

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