



TURNING DIRT

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Part One: Considerations for the First-Time Tractor Buyer

If you've been a Whitetail News subscriber for a few years or seen our food plot segments on TV, you know that we've talked a lot about how to prepare food plots with ATV equipment or even simple hand tools. It's true that ATVs can be very effective tools for food plot work, but the time may come when you decide to move up to a tractor, and when you do, there are a few things to consider before you lay down your cash. This article, while certainly not exhaustive of the topic, should provide you with good information to help you start your search.

Tractors suited for food plot work are generally of three types. "Agricultural tractors" are large, heavy-duty tractors suited to commercial farming. "Utility tractors" are smaller, less powerful or both than agricultural tractors, but heavy duty and usually sufficient for private farms and small commercial farming operations. "Compact tractors" (some manufacturers refer to these as sub-compact or compact-utility tractors) are smaller, less powerful or both than utility tractors and suited for small, private farms. All offer more functional capability than lawn-and-garden tractors and ATVs, and they can be had with necessary features, such as a PTO and three-point hitch, which most lawn-and-garden tractors lack.

Step One: Identifying Your Needs: At first blush, this might seem a simple question. If the heaviest duty you will regularly ask of your tractor is ground tillage, the temptation can be to immediately jump to the conclusion that we "just need something that will pull a disk." It's almost never that simple, though, so it's a great idea to sit down with pen and paper first and make a needs list.

First, consider how much acreage you will till each year, how rough the terrain is (e.g. sloped or flat, heavy or light, sandy soil), and how much time you have to do the work. If you have heavier soils or otherwise more mechanically stressful conditions to deal with, then you might be served with a heavier-duty tractor.

Second, consider what sorts of jobs you expect to accomplish with your tractor. Take into account your heaviest anticipated use because if you have to continually operate your tractor at peak output, it will age the machine.

Third, consider practical issues, such as what kinds of implements you will use and whether they will attach to the front or the back of the tractor. If you will have to transport the tractor to and from your property, also be sure to consider whether your vehicle is up to the job.

Fourth, consider how much time you have to do your tractor work. If you are like most of us, and your time is limited, you may need a more-powerful tractor so you can work at a faster pace.

Step Two: Finding the Right Tractor: Once you've completed your needs list using the criteria above, you really only have three variables to consider in finding the right tractor for you. These are power, size and cost.

When it comes to power, a question commonly asked by folks just getting into tractors is, "What horsepower tractor do I need?" If there was ever an over-generalized question, this is it!

If you've been around folks who are discussing

tractors, you've probably heard them say something like, "I have a 50-horse tractor." That's because over time, it has become customary for people to quickly identify tractors in conversation simply by manufacturer and Hp rating. However it may not mean that the particular tractor has enough power to do what you want it to. Analyzing your power requirements starts with a basic understanding of what the term "power" means in the context of tractors from a practical standpoint.

To put things in perspective, let's look at a commonly familiar term - horsepower. Hp is basically just a standardized way to measure power. According to the standard, one Hp is required to move 330 pounds a distance of 100 feet in one minute. What we need to know, though, is the amount of Hp that a given model can deliver where you need it to do a specific job. That is described in tractor conversations as either "Engine Hp" or "PTO Hp." (Note: There's also something out there called "Drawbar Hp", but that's beyond the scope of this article.)

Engine Hp: Technically, this is the amount of horsepower a tractor's engine puts out when sitting still and running without trying to move anything. However, when most folks talk about a given tractor's engine Hp in conversation, they're usually referring to the tractor's ability to pull something, such as a plow or disk.

PTO Hp: This is the amount of Hp the tractor has available at its "PTO" (power takeoff unit) to lift things and to drive rotational implements such as brush cutters and post-hole diggers.

Special Considerations Concerning Smaller Tractors: If you are considering buying a smaller tractor to pull something such as a plow or disk, additional factors that can increase traction are especially important.

Consider purchasing a four-wheel-drive model, which can offer greater pulling ability than a comparable two-wheel-drive model. Also, stick with cleated, agricultural-type tires instead of turf tires to maximize traction.

Traction can also be increased by adding weight to the tractor. Common methods of adding weight are hanging cast-iron plates on it, or filling its rear tires up about three-quarters of the way with a liquid such as calcium chloride and one-quarter with air. Add only enough to get the traction you need because a certain amount of tire slippage actually helps protect the drive train, and excess weight can also over-compact the soil.

Cost Issues: When purchasing a new tractor, remember to check with the manufacturer for information about any rebates that might be offered. Also be sure to compare what comes standard on each model. What you save on a lower price tag can be quickly negated if you have to add optional features to one model that would have come standard on another. Desirable features include power steering, an outlet for a remote hydraulic cylinder if necessary and, if you will be adding cast-iron weights, a weight bar at the front.

If you are considering buying a lower-quality or gray-market tractor to save money, remember the old saying, "You get what you pay for." That statement was never truer than it is here! There are some good low-priced models out there, but others may break easily and lack parts and service availability. In such cases, you'd be better off buying a well-maintained, used tractor manufactured by a reputable company than a new one with a cheap sticker.

When shopping for a used tractor, apply the same criteria mentioned above for new tractors. When you find one that has raised your interest, make sure that its systems, including its safety features, are present and in good, working order. Your tractor should have a seatbelt and, if it does not have a cab, an OSHA-certified ROPS (rollover protective structure). A prudent buyer will also pay a few bucks to hire a reputable tractor mechanic to inspect a used machine prior to purchase rather than relying on the representations of the seller. And pay him for his time - "you get what you pay for" applies to tractor mechanics too.

By now, you should be getting a feel for how to go about choosing a tractor to meet your food plot needs. In a nutshell, you are looking for a good-quality tractor with the features you need, enough power to handle your heaviest anticipated use, and in a size that you can haul if you need to. By approaching your search in an organized manner using the step-by-step analysis provided above, you should be able to wade through the multitude of offerings in the food plot tractor market and find exactly the right tractor for your needs. 🦌



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