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Cut to the Quick

We test the 12 fastest—and toughest—string trimmers on the market.

BY ROY BERENDSOHN

A lawn isn't finished until it's trimmed. The right machines can transform a shaggy, unattractive mess into a crisp summer landscape. And as any suburbanite who has had a peaceful barbecue interrupted by the whine of a small engine can tell you, the tool to finish the job is the string trimmer.

These outdoor power tools are relatively simple, but not benign. That's because the speed measured at the string's tip can run about 28,000-ft. per minute. One tester slipped as he trimmed and stripped the bark off a fine old lilac.

Cautionary notes aside, string trimmers are fun because they make short work of a difficult lawn care chore. We tested a dozen for this article, from the most basic homeowner machine to pro models. After three days of working on a lawn, an orchard and around overgrown fence rows, we think we have a good idea of which trimmer to choose for what kind of work.

THE DEEP-GRASS TEST: Slash through an overgrown hillside.

Trimmer Shopping

The biggest factor to consider when choosing a trimmer is how much property you maintain. If you trim around a few flowerbeds and along your driveway, any of these machines will be adequate.

A rural homeowner with a long driveway, orchards, fence rows and outbuildings to keep neat is best served by a commercial trimmer. The power and reduced vibration these machines provide offset their higher cost. Commercial features such as a solid-steel drive-shaft and a carefully balanced forged crankshaft reduce vibration; just as important, they improve the product's durability. Residential machines use a pressed-steel crank, and their engines are built to less exacting tolerances than those on commercial machines.

Suppose you have a suburban lot that's larger than an acre but you don't need a pro model. In that case, any of the machines we describe as Near-Pro should work well for you.

Engines

Most string trimmers today have two-stroke engines that burn the familiar gas/oil mix. Over the past several years, manufacturers have experimented, not always successfully, with four-cycle engines to give homeowners a string trimmer that takes the same fuel as their lawnmower or tractor. There may be an environmental benefit, too. Briggs & Stratton claims that its four-cycle engine reduces emissions by 70 percent compared to two-stroke technology. We did notice that four-cycle trimmer engines are larger and heavier than their two-stroke counterparts. And you have to remember to keep the crankcase filled. We learned that these engines

Pro-Quality Trimmers

A heavy-duty crankshaft, precisely bored engine block and tightly fitting piston give these products power and smoothness.



SHINDAIWA

T251G

Price: \$370
Engine: 25cc
four-cycle/two-stroke hybrid



What we liked: This machine has power to spare, and it growls like a hot rod. A bonus is its easy-wind line head.
Disliked: Was one of two trimmers for which no dislikes were noted, but it is expensive.



HUSQVARNA

125L

Price: \$200
Engine: 28cc
two-stroke



What we liked: Everything. It's powerful, smooth and the easiest-starting trimmer. Impervious to weed winding around the head.
Disliked: Surely there must have been something to not like on this product. Actually, no.



STIHL

FS 55 RC-E

Price: \$230
Engine: 27.2cc
two-stroke



What we liked: Lots of power and a tough 0.095-in.-dia. line make this an aggressive cutter with an easy bump-feed mechanism.
Disliked: Proved hard to start once or twice.



ECHO

GT-200R

Price: \$150
Engine: 21.2cc
two-stroke



What we liked: Lightweight (about 9 pounds—2 to 3 pounds lighter than comparable tools). Simple and easy to start. The only curved shaft that cut like a pro.
Disliked: Some testers liked bump-feed heads better than the two individual pieces of line on this trimmer.