

What to Look for When Buying a Compact Tractor



A compact, yet well-equipped combination: 22hp tractor with foldable rollbar, front loader and trailer.

By **Tom Barnes, Kubota (UK) Ltd**

It's a familiar story. The old, faithful tractor is starting to show its age and the time has come to look for a replacement. The problem is that it's been at least 10 years since you took an interest in the types, makes or models on the market and the features that are available, either fitted as standard, or as optional extras.

However, you do know that it must be small(ish), manoeuvrable, quiet and economical, yet with sufficient engine power and rear linkage lift capacity to carry out all of the essential seasonal jobs around the buildings, yards and paddocks. You could head straight off to your nearest dealer to see what he has available, but as with most major spending decisions, it always pays to do some homework first.

Start off by considering the type of work that it will be expected to do. Then ask yourself these questions:

- 1) With which implements will the tractor be used and how much power is required to drive them? What do they weigh and can the tractor lift them?
- 2) Does the tractor need to load and pull trailers?
- 3) Is a front loader available and can it be easily removed and attached?
- 4) Over what surfaces and in what conditions will the tractor be required to work?
- 5) Is there a choice of tyres? Is four-wheel drive available?
- 6) Will the tractor be working regularly inside buildings where access is restricted? If so, measure carefully all doorways vertically and horizontally. It is pointless buying a tractor which is even 1mm too wide, or is fitted with a cab which is just a smidgeon too high.

Cab or no cab?

If the tractor has a roll-bar, ensure that it can be folded easily and quickly



A mid-mounted mower deck is a useful attachment for paddock maintenance, leaving the rear linkage free for other attachments.

to reduce overall height and allow access to areas where headroom is tight. On the other hand, if the tractor is to be used exclusively for yard and fieldwork throughout the year, then a cab could be one of the most important items on your shopping list. Most modern cabs are quiet, comfortable and have a heater for those frosty winter mornings. Some smallholders wouldn't want a cab on their tractor even if you gave it to them for free, preferring to be out in the open air and not sitting in a confined space.

Transmission

You will be faced with the choice of whether to go for hydrostatic transmission or a mechanical gearbox. If haymaking, trailer towing or yardwork are the principal tasks, then stepless hydrostatic transmission will make driving far easier, especially when working close to obstacles and manoeuvring in tight corners.

Because hydrostatic drive allows the speed of forward or reverse travel to be instantly and infinitely varied without any change in engine speed, the finish produced by a powered implement will always remain consistent because there is no reduction in the rotational speed of the tractor's power take-off drive shaft. Another advantage of hydrostatic transmission is that you can shift from forward to reverse travel by a simple movement of the right foot, without removing your hands from the steering wheel. This ability makes the hydrostatic tractor ideal for loader work or for yard scraping, where constant changes of direction are necessary.



Alternatively, choose a rear-mounted mower, but make sure that the mower is matched correctly to the tractor.



A mechanical gearbox is better suited to heavy towing or draught work such as cultivation or mole draining.

There is still a place for the manual gearbox, especially where the tractor is dedicated to heavy towing or draught work such as ploughing, soil cultivation and mole drainage. Under such conditions, drive from the engine to the wheels is limited only by the amount of power that the clutch can transmit, depending on the load being pulled. If the load on the engine is too great, it is more likely that the engine will stall before the clutch starts to slip. The answer is to change down to a lower gear in good time, making the engine work less hard, while improving the efficiency of power transmission.

With a hydrostatic drive tractor, it is a combination of hydraulic oil and gears which transmit the power from the engine to the driven wheels. Although the tractor might be equipped with two or three mechanical speed ranges to suit different working applications, the 'weakest' link in the drive train is the oil in the hydrostatic unit and the pressure relief valve.

Transmission type needs to be selected according to the principal type of work that the tractor will be asked to do.

Match the tractor to the implements

Few tractor suppliers offer a range of badged implements which are purpose-matched to the tractors within the company's range. Kubota is an exception.

If you already own a number of implements, ensure that they are correctly matched to the tractor. This means checking not only that that the tractor can drive them, but that it can safely and effortlessly lift any implement attached to the three-point linkage.

You may find that a fancied tractor delivers considerably more power than is actually needed to drive and carry all existing implements. In this case, you could consider investing - budget allowing - in larger implements. The advantage is that you will improve workrates, getting jobs completed faster and with less effort.

Like cars, vans and trucks, the list of items which are fitted as standard to the modern compact tractor grows longer year on year. They include power steering, wet disc brakes, illuminated instrument consoles, colour-coded control levers, rubber-mounted flat deck driver's platforms, and fully-opening bonnets and grilles.

Features

Other features are specific to certain makes or models of tractor. Two examples found on the Kubota range are the E-TVCS diesel engines, delivering low noise, low vibration and low emissions, and the Bi-Speed Turn system fitted to Kubota B10 series and ST Alpha hydrostatic tractors, encompassing five models from 21hp to 35hp. Ideal for confined spaces and when manoeuvring on headlands, the system automatically speeds up the driven front wheels when making sharp turns, producing smoother, tighter steering without surface scuffing.

There are also items to be considered which are very much 'job specific' and may need to be added as an option to the tractor's basic specification. They include additional external hydraulic spool valves, front-end weights, wheel weights and an automatic pick-up hitch.

There are many different compact tractors from which to choose, but no matter how tempting a tractor might appear within a glossy brochure, or on a show stand, it will only be as good as the after-sales service and parts support you receive.

Go for a well-established make with a national dealer network and beware of so-called 'grey imports' - cheap, look-alike tractors sourced from non-EU countries which may not comply with the latest health and safety, or highways legislation.

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