

Mulcher Grants Oaks a New Lease on Life

Mulcher attachment on a skid-steer loader effectively and efficiently clears unwanted vegetation.

Residents of Kane County (IL) love the idyllic mixture of suburbia, rural lands, and forest preserves they call home. The abundance of oak woodlands scattered across the county provide a buffer that makes the distance from downtown Chicago seem like a lot farther than the 40 miles that it is. But non-native vegetation like Buckthorn and Honeysuckle is threatening many of the wooded oases. Having rapidly invaded most woodlands, these species are well established and have proven to be hard to control by hand. Buckthorn is one of several non-native shrubs that are impeding the reproduction of oak trees and literally shading young seedlings to death.

"In the past, with 12 really good chainsaw operators," says Drew Ullberg, "we could *maybe* have marched across 20 acres of buckthorn infested oak woodlands in a month." That changed dramatically two years ago when Kane County bought an ASV RC100 (www.asvi.com) with a Fecon Bull Hog mulcher attachment (www.fecon.com). "With the Fecon we're doing an acre a day."

Ullberg, who is the director of natural resources for the Forest Preserve District—Kane County, is responsible for all on-the-ground land restoration and management projects. That entails anything to do with habitat improvement, from evaluating the site to doing the project. The bulk of the work that Ullberg's crews undertake is brush clearing, both in prairies and in degraded woodlands.

They are in the business of saving trees, so they selectively thin rather than

clear-cut areas. That often entails the removal of materials within inches of (and with no damage to) the good oaks. This is a testament to the maneuverability of the skid-steer ASV as well as the highly localized shredding action of the Bull Hog cutter head.

A Lethal 1-2 Punch

From Ullberg's vantage point, the skid-steer and mulcher combination is ideal. The tracked ASV gets his crews to the sites where it is needed with mini-

tipped cutter teeth. These fixed position teeth rip into the material to be cleared, leaving a carpet of mulch in its wake. Because the skid has vertical lift capability, heavily brushed areas are no problem—as operators can raise the Bull Hog and work their way into the brushy mess from the top.

A lengthy Evaluation

A pragmatist by nature Ullberg, knew that manual clearing of Buckthorn and Honeysuckle was not the answer. So he began his search to mechanize the process and found myriad choices. Knowing that he would have to live with whatever equipment decision that he made, Ullberg embarked on a thorough evaluation of each mulching technology.

He and his crews watched numerous equipment demonstrations, and talked to a lot of manufacturers, dealers, and owners using mulchers in comparable situations. They watched contractors who operated land clearing equipment especially when working in comparable situations. The most interesting piece of advice came from a neighboring municipality that had opted for a swinging flail mulcher. In a nutshell they said "Don't make the same mistake that we made," and suggested that he buy a Bull Hog instead.

"Their reasoning was sound—that the flails can bend back on themselves when they encounter heavy materials—so there is no cutting happening," recalls Ullberg. The method of attaching the flails to the rotor was also deemed to be problematic, as the long rods can become bent and difficult to remove. Ullberg prefers his mulcher's



Mulcher allows operators to work their way into brushy areas from the top down.

mal soil disturbance. Once there, the nimble carrier positions the mulcher's cutter head precisely. This allows maximum impact on the intended target and virtually no collateral damage to surrounding good trees.

The skid's hydraulics power the mulcher's rotor, which contains carbide



View of a stand of oaks before Buckthorn and Honeysuckle are removed by the skid-steer mounted mulcher...

fixed cutter teeth, which bolt on. "These teeth are working whenever the machine is," comments Ullberg. If an operator accidentally encounters steel or other waste material, breaking a tooth "we simply replace them and move on," says Ullberg.

Ullberg was diligent in questioning dealers and manufacturers about their service and support. "Fecon is in Ohio so parts are within a day if needed," he comments.

Nearly two years after taking delivery of the ASV/Bull Hog combo, Ullberg is pleased with the equipment. In addition to the greatly enhanced productivity, he

cites low maintenance of the unit as a strong selling point. "Maintenance downtime has been almost zero," says Ullberg. "Aside from some easily accessible grease fittings and visual inspections before and after we work it, there is not much to maintaining the Bull Hog."

It is important to preserve your oasis—from the encroachment of the concrete jungles of metropolitan life and internal threats like fast-growing Buckthorn and Honeysuckle. Because each day that the mulcher is in the shop, the unchecked growth of non-native species threatens this wooded Mecca called Kane County. GE



...and view of the same stand of oaks after the mulcher has removed the unwanted growth and left a carpet of mulch in its wake.