

# BREAKING NEW GROUND

TILLERS • CULTIVATORS • HAND TOOLS

Here's news that won't shake you: Tillers and cultivators run more smoothly than ever, and mini-tillers that can fit in a car trunk are turning up more and more. And it's not all about power—we'll give you the dirt on innovative, comfortable hand tools, pure mulches and biodegradable products.

By Kristen Hampshire

**W**hen it comes to today's tillers and cultivators, big things increasingly come in small packages. Numerous manufacturers are making models that pack more power and digging ability into smaller sizes, and consumers will find improved *tine* (cutting teeth) design, adjustable handlebars and attention to balance, which makes it easier to control the machines. Even big, workhorse tillers are easier to start and maneuver than they were just 3 years ago.

But, as any gardener knows, turning the soil is only the beginning of the process. In the tool aisle, we found ergonomic designs that cater to the budding gardener and those of us in full bloom (read: baby boomers with arthritic hands). Meanwhile, landscape fabrics made from recyclables and mulches consisting of *coir* (coconut) or virgin wood shavings are aimed at making your green thumb even greener.

**Smooth Operators.** Garden-type-variety tillers and cultivators are giving ground to new equipment that is less of a hassle to operate. This includes models at all prices that include such things as power reverse on rear-tine tillers that improves maneuverability in tight spaces, improved tine designs that cut deeper without jarring you and adjustable handlebars that swivel to positions on either side of the tiller. Then there's the wide array of *mini-tillers* that now have four-cycle engines, which gives them the power of the full-size models even though they're

used for different tasks. (A mini-tiller digs at least 6 inches deep; walk-behind tillers dig 6 to 10 inches.)

And don't confuse a mini-tiller with a *cultivator*. Mini-tillers will drive tines into the soil; cultivators fluff soil at the surface, no deeper than 6 inches. Be-

ware if you see or hear claims that a cultivator can act as a mini-tiller.

Some cultivator manufacturers market their products as "multi-use" machines by selling interchangeable tines and attachments that convert hand-held models into edgers and aerators; these





accessories can cost \$50 to \$75 extra. But these claims can be overstated, says Eric Rhonehouse, merchant buyer for The Home Depot's tiller/cultivator category. "They don't spin fast enough to really be an edger," he says. However, the machines can work with an aeration tool, because that process isn't about precision and creating a fine line.

There are a few walk-behind cultivators that are designed for bigger fluffing jobs, but at press time, Husqvarna was scheduled to release this month the first walk-behind battery-powered model, the TB 1000. At 71 pounds, it's heavier than any mini-tiller or cultivator on the market, and its adjustable-tine assembly allows it to till from 8-1/2 to 18-1/2 inches wide, a width comparable with a full-size tiller and as much as double

the capacity of other electric tillers. Pricing was not available at press time, but you can be sure it won't be at the low end of the scale.

And speaking of power, you should know that the power-equipment industry is getting away from using horsepower to compare engines because of inconsistent definitions of horsepower and the various standards that are used to measure it. "In tilling, you need torque to power through the soil you are driving tines into, not just the horsepower that gives you speed," says Gent Simmons, product manager for Husqvarna. Consequently, several manufacturers stopped using a horsepower rating on packaging.

*Displacement*, measured in cubic centimeters (cc), is a more accurate way to

rate engine power, according to Tom Pernice of Honda, and manufacturers are putting that number out there more prominently for you to see. Displacement is the total volume of air/fuel mix that an engine can draw in during a complete engine cycle. Generally, for a given rpm, larger displacement means more air/fuel mixture ingested and burned, and therefore, more power and *torque*, which produces the downward digging motion of tillers and cultivators. Although you might not be able to find a torque rating for a tiller or cultivator, bigger engines make more power and more torque, all other things being equal.

As for the big boys at the top of the power—and price—scale, full-size tillers at all prices increasingly have their tines located at the rear or midsection of



## Best Buys in Cultivators, Mini-Tillers & Tillers

### Best Buy Categories:

[P]=Premium selection;  
[M]=Midrange selection;  
[E]=Economy selection.  
See page 72.

Best Buys in cultivators, mini-tillers and tillers were selected based on ease of use, performance and durability.

All Best Buy products come with a 2-year warranty except where noted.

All Best Buy cultivators and mini-tillers have one forward speed.

All Best Buy walk-behind rotary tillers have forward-rotating tines that self-clean, bolo tines, which cut at an angle and are designed for deep tilling,

**Honda FG110AT mini-tiller**



and maneuverable handlebars.

*Best Price* reflects the lowest retail price available at press time and is subject to change.

### Gas-Powered Mini-Tillers

#### [P] Honda FG110AT

List: \$379; *Best Price*: \$349  
Overall, the FG110AT delivers a smooth "ride." Although it's compact enough to till in between garden rows (as you would expect from a mini-tiller), we like that this model has the digging depth and engine displacement necessary to chew through vegetation and clay soils and perform well in larger beds, too. It comes with a wheel kit that is used to transport the unit to and from the digging site. Some brands charge extra for this.

#### Features:

- \* Engine: Honda 25cc 4-cycle
- \* Tilling width: 9-in.
- \* Tine speed: 294 rpm
- \* Weight: 29 lbs.

#### [M] Craftsman 29262

List: \$249; *Best Price*: \$190  
Although this machine's maximum digging depth is a bit shallow at 5 inches, it can do more than mere soil fluffing, because its variable-speed throttle gives you more con-

trol over the machine. You just slow it down to dig deeply in an area.

#### Features:

- \* Engine: MTD SW 31.5cc 2-cycle
- \* Tilling width: 10-in.
- \* Tine speed: 175 rpm
- \* Weight: 30 lbs.

### Electric Mini-Tillers/Cultivators

#### [P] Mantis 7250

List: \$349; *Best Price*: \$320  
The 7250 provides the same power and digging depth as Mantis' gas-powered models and more power than competing electric tillers. The patented serpentine tines on this mini-tiller allow the machine to dig 4 inches deeper (10 inches) than other electric units, and it is the only electric model we could find that is classified as a mini-tiller. You can purchase a cord-management kit for \$75 that comes with a 30-foot cord, reel, stake and an additional 50-inch extension cord. The Mantis also comes with a 5-year warranty.

#### Features:

- \* Power: 540 watts
- \* Tilling width: 9-in.
- \* Tine speed: 240 rpm
- \* Weight: 21 lbs.



**Troy-Bilt Super Bronco CRT Rototiller**

#### [M] Troy-Bilt TB154

List: \$200; *Best Price*: \$200  
The TB154 battery-operated cultivator digs up to 8 inches deep, which is deeper than many other cultivators, and it has an adjustable tilling width, which also is atypical in this category.

#### Features:

- \* Power: 120-volt battery/6.5 amp
- \* Tilling width: 6- to 10-1/4-in.
- \* Tine speed: 320 rpm
- \* Weight: 18.6 lbs.

#### [E] Black & Decker GC818

List: \$100; *Best Price*: \$100  
The lightweight, cordless GC818 is