

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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“Everyone is trending toward less turf, even on bigger estates,” says Margie Grace, owner of Grace Design Associates, a landscape design and building firm in Santa Barbara, Calif. She calls it “waking from our lawn coma.”

By GWENDOLYN BOUNDS

Linda and Bob Thayer of Wellington, Ohio, recently invested in a sporty new set of wheels. It boasts a premium engine, high-backed ergonomic seating and all-wheel steering that can turn the vehicle on a dime.

It also cuts the grass.

John Deere’s “R-Gator” utility vehicle boasts GPS navigation, infrared cameras and obstacle sensors. It’s main mission is to support troops and keep them from harm’s way. But one day its technology could be used at home - in your backyard. WSJ’s Gwendolyn Bounds reports.

They’re part of a new trend fueling green envy in America: the rise of the tricked-out lawn mower. Today, speedier cutting technology is practically de rigueur. Mower makers are now focused on mimicking the auto industry with cosmetic and creature comforts. Sun shades, iPod compartments, cruise control, chrome hub caps and even alternative fuels are all part of the mower mania.

Cutting-edge designs start at around \$3,000 and go for more than \$10,000—or roughly the cost of a 2010 Nissan Versa.

Hustler Turf Equipment offers the \$10,000-plus commercial “Super Z” mower, which can jet along at 15 mph and has enough mechanical brawn to cut grass 40 hours a week. The price tag hasn’t deterred residential customers, who “simply want the biggest, baddest mower on the block,” says marketing director Adam Mullet.

Tim Strong of Raleigh, N.C., recently paid \$4,000 for a commercial-grade reel mower from Locke, a brand once used in Yankee Stadium. It lends a striped appearance to his lawn by bending blades in alternate directions as he mows. It’s also attention-getting. One neighbor marveled, “That’s a pretty big-sized machine you’ve got there.” Mr. Strong says that no other machine will give him the scissor-like precision-cut he wants for his Zoysia grass, a cushiony turf common on the golf links. “Quite frankly, I think your lawn and how you maintain it sends a message about how you treat other things you own and who you are,” he says.

Despite environmentalists’ ongoing campaign to peg grass as water-wasting turf, homeowners are snapping up high-end riding mowers with an appetite not seen since before the recession. After double-digit decreases for the past two years, U.S. shipments



Linda Thayer on the \$4,200 zero-turn riding lawnmower that she and her husband purchased to cut grass on their acreage in Wellington, Ohio.

of riders are expected to climb slightly more than 6% over the next two years, according to the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute.

For some buyers, the new mower mood is a reaction to the economy. As tight credit, unemployment woes and lower home resale values persist, more people are staying put and improving existing dwellings—as well as investing in higher-end equipment to care for it.

For others, a mower upgrade is tinged with a little neighborly competition. “Most of us are guilty of trying to get the yard to look better than our neighbors. That goes right along with equipment having to be cooler than the neighbors,” says Jim Bednar, a senior marketing manager for MTD Products Inc.’s Cub Cadet brand. Last year, Cub Cadet added an iPod holder with earphone slot into its lawn tractors. “It’s well beyond cupholders,” Mr. Bednar says.

To a large extent, there is pent-up demand after a several-year dry spell where consumers belt-tightened and repaired old equipment. Now that they are ready to buy, they are often buying big—especially the pricier “zero-turn” riders, which can make super-tight rotations around trees or flower beds, often cutting mowing time in half.

“Like people buying SUVs, they may be buying more mower than is technically necessary but that will give them a greater degree of comfort,” says Kris Kiser, the institute’s executive vice president.

The current appetite for high-end mowers is slightly counterintuitive. Some environmentalists and health advocates have been pushing homeowners to decrease pesticide and water usage by dialing back their lawn size. A growing number of towns and utilities offer financial incentives for such moves.

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Some towns are beefing up noise ordinances for outdoor power equipment. “It’s all leading to less grass possibly,” says Greg Weekes, a marketing manager for Deere & Co., owner of the John Deere brand.

Still, Deere says it is seeing a 2010 mower sales uptick that is “far exceeding” forecasts, Mr. Weekes says. The company is currently experimenting with robotic technology for use in future models, while others such as Cub Cadet and Ariens Co. now sell riding mowers running on propane or batteries.

At Home Depot Inc., riding mower sales growth is up low double-digits through April with higher-end products performing best. Sears Holdings Corp., for its part, now runs “Demo Days” at its namesake stores so customers can test-drive mowers. The company is painting its Craftsman brand units in sports-car colors like hot red, yellow and jet black.

Less expensive walk-behind mowers are still the biggest sellers in the U.S. But among those upgrading to riders, and in particular zero-turns, are the 76 million Baby Boomers who are eyeing retirement and crave a less taxing yard routine.

Ms. Thayer of Ohio, a 52-year-old high school administrator who is retiring next year, convinced her husband to buy a \$4,200 Cub Cadet “Z-Force S” zero-turn unit because it boasted so many accoutrements—including a car-like steering wheel versus the lap bars used on most zero-turns. “When I cut my grass it shouldn’t be uncomfortable,” she says.

Similarly, 62-year-old Skip Billbey plunked down \$12,000 to buy a Gravely 260 diesel zero-turn mower with a 60-inch cutting width, and he now grooms five acres in just a few hours, or half the time of his old rider.

His dealer, Howard Welsh at Gambles lawn and garden equipment in Alpena, Mich., has a simple explanation for the uber-mower movement. “People are stressed out and wore out from working way too many hours,” he says. Customers “don’t live to cut grass.”

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