

Half-Scale Hobby Turns Into Thriving Business

One year ago, Kurt Smith told FARM SHOW readers how he built two 1/2-scale tractors out of Cub Cadet and Deere garden tractors (Vol. 35, No. 1). Since then, the Milan, Mich., entrepreneur has started a business building custom tractors.

"I advertised in Red Power Magazine in January 2011, and the ad netted two tractor orders. I've had 2 to 3 months of orders ever since," he says. "I'm very happy and count my blessings every day. We went to Red Power Round Up last summer and left with 6 more orders from contacts made there."

The husband and father of two young children had been unemployed, but was plenty busy this past year building 7 1/2-scale tractors along with his other business, lettering and pin-striping vehicles. He has orders for 8 more tractors this year.

While most of them are IH tractors, he's open to working on other models.

"I'll take a look at any make or model that someone wants me to build. I'll determine if I can build it or not and give them an estimate," he explains. "These tractors are as much art as they are engineering. In building them I use everything I've learned from my past – on the farm, sign making

and graphic design."

With 15 years experience in graphic design, Smith starts each project on his computer and prints out a pattern.

"I design it so when I walk in the shop I have a full-size layout to measure from," he says. He starts with old garden tractors he often finds locally and tears them down to the frame, engine, transmission and steering pedestal. He also buys seats, tires, rims and lights.

Using his pattern, he fabricates the rest of the parts from steel, .040 aluminum and a 1/8-in. thick aluminum/plastic composite used in sign making. He hires a friend who owns a machine shop to make rear hub extensions to add 3 in. to the width, and to build assemblies for tricycle-style tractors. He also hires a mechanic if the tractor needs engine work.

Smith likes the simplicity of Cub Cadets; Deere tractors take a little longer. But he has favorites in both models.

"The half-size Deere 430 was the cutest one I've done," he says. "I also like the IH 1206 with the white fenders and nose. That's a sharp tractor."

He's excited about future projects. A customer ordered an IH 1066 pulling tractor with a turbo-charged, 3-cyl. Kubota diesel



After building a pair of 1/2-scale tractors for himself, Kurt Smith decided to turn his hobby into a successful business.

engine. He's also working on V-8 IH 1568 replicas that will have twin cylinder engines with two chrome stacks, and a diesel IH 1206 Wheatland tractor.

Often customers request tractors that their fathers or grandfathers used for farming. One customer ordered a miniature replica of his tractor for his 5-year-old son.

Prices for the tractors vary greatly according to details and modifications required. Smith provides free cost estimates on all projects.

Smith's website showcases photos of his latest and past projects.

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While most of his tractors are IH models, Smith says he's willing to work on other brands.

www.thelittletractortco.blogspot.com).

Self-Serve Hay A Good Marketing Option

Jud Harward started selling self-serve hay a decade ago when he had an ample supply of small bales, but not enough time to stand around and sell them. It's still a marketing method that makes sense for many operations, he says.

The idea for Bales-R-Us, Hay-4-U started when he was eager to sell the 250,000 small bales his farm produces each year, along with large bales. When people called about picking up hay, and he was busy working in the fields or making deliveries, he started telling callers to help themselves and leave money in the box. As more customers purchased hay that way, he started monitoring it and learned that he had a 5 to 10 percent loss. People were taking more bales than they were paying for. While that was significant, it wasn't enough to warrant paying someone to sell fulltime. To make up for the losses, he raised his prices.

Currently, Harward sells hay for \$7 to \$9 a small square bale, ranging from grass

to alfalfa and mixes in between. The kinds of hay are well marked, and signs make suggestions for which hay to purchase – alfalfa for high-performance working horses and grass for pet horses, for example. He provides envelopes and slips for customers to fill in their names, number of bales and amount paid by cash, check or credit card information. Customers drop the envelopes in a slot on a safe.

With the current economic situation, Harward says he's making some changes. Like other businesses he wants to move away from checks to credit/debit cards.

He has always included some security measures to avoid serious losses. First of all, people have to drive past his home to get to the hay sheds. Secondly, he advertises that he has hay for sale, but not that he has self-serve hay. That's been advertised only by word-of-mouth, so that he doesn't attract strangers who might take advantage.

"It works especially well in a small rural



Photo courtesy of Hay & Forage Grower magazine

Jud Harward operates a self-serve hay selling business out of this metal shed, where both small and big square bales are stored. Customers are on the honor system.

area where you know your customers," he says. "If you know how many bales are in your stack, it's easy to keep inventory."

Besides eliminating checks, he's also considering setting hours – four or five hours

a day when someone will be around to monitor the self-serve sales.

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Engine-Powered Pine Straw Baler

Mike Murphy's GRSSN Machine takes some of the labor out of baling pine "straw" needles, which is a common sideline business for many folks in Southern states. The Salem, Alabama, man was inspired to invent his compactor/baler after his pastor told him he had manually baled about 200 bales in a day.

Murphy's unit allows one person to bale 300 to 400 bales a day.

"The Lord showed me how to build it," says Murphy, a retired sheet metal worker. "It works like a log splitter."

After loading the twine, fill the hopper and cage with a couple of big handfuls of pine needles. Start up the 5 1/2 hp motor and the 2-in. hydraulic shaft with 8,000 psi compresses the needles into 14-in. sq. by 28-in. long bales ready to manually tie. Remove the bale, reset the twine and go

again. Bales weigh between 15 and 20 lbs. and are ready to sell to the landscape market for about \$2.50 wholesale or \$3.50 retail.

Murphy builds the units on 4-ft. wide trailers that fit easily between pine trees planted in rows 6 ft. apart. The trailers are built out of angle iron and expanded metal. The compacting unit is made of 10-gauge sheet metal.

Pine trees have become the South's big cash crop, Murphy says, and he built the baler with his grandsons in mind. There are plenty of needles to be purchased and collected (for 50 cents/bale) to start their own businesses. He also sells his patent-pending unit for \$4,500.

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Mike Murphy's pine straw balers are built on 4-ft. wide trailers that fit between rows of pine trees. Powered by a 5 1/2 hp motor, baler compresses needles into 14-in. sq. by 28-in. long bales for sale to the landscape market. One person can make 300 to 400 bales a day.