

have it checked out, and it wasn't under warranty since the cause of the problem wasn't found."

Lawrence Fish, Sanborn, N.Y.: "It's the best lawn and garden tractor I've ever owned," says Lawrence about his 1980 Case 16 hp garden tractor equipped with an Onan engine and 48-in. mower deck. "After one year of use the gears in the oil pump broke, and of course the warranty had just expired. Also, the engine seized up. However, Onan supplied a new engine and the dealer installed it for \$125. Since then I've been using this tractor all year long. I don't think 26 years with the same engine is too bad."

Howard Cigelske, Beaver Dam, Wis.: "My Kawasaki Mule 550 utility vehicle is a handy machine for doing chores. It saves gas compared to using a pickup, and the dump box comes in handy for hauling stones, brush, or other cargo. It's an excellent vehicle for fixing, checking and changing pasture fences and for checking on our livestock's water supply."

David Bell, Houlton, Wis.: A 2000 Bobcat 753 skid steer loader rates as David's "best buy". "I use this machine hard for grading, loading, and tearing out concrete. It has about 1,200 hours on it yet I've replaced only the battery. This skid loader has unbelievable engineering and dependability."

"My Harbor Freight 1-in. rotary hammer didn't have much power and wore out quickly. Many of Harbor Freight's tools are good values, but for electric tools that I'll use hard and often I stick to more expensive name brands."

Mitch Plemmons, Leicester, N.C.: Mitch bought a Deere 2120 60 hp tractor made in Canada and says it's his "best buy". "This tractor was made sometime between 1968 and 1972. I paid \$3,500 for it. When I got it, it didn't look the best because someone had painted it an off-color green and yellow. I gave it a new paint job and new decals, and now it looks great. It runs like a top and has been a really good tractor with no problems. It was well worth the money. I guess not all odd-ball tractors are bad."

Terry Lamers, Dallas, Oregon: "I bought my 1981 Isuzu 4-WD diesel pickup used 16 years ago, and now it has about 348,000 miles on it. It's my best buy. This pickup runs like new. Neither the pan nor the head has ever been off the engine."

James Rissler, Hopkinsville, Ky.: "I like my Yard Shark zero turn mower (www.yardsharkmowers.com). It can be equipped with either a 51 or 60-in. High-lift Turbo deck. It lets me mow at speeds up to 11 mph, and I can mow on slopes up to 35 degrees."

Wally Fink, Albert Lea, Minn.: "My 1988 Ford F-250 pickup equipped with a 7.3-liter diesel engine is my best buy."

Robert Daniels, Elberon, Iowa: "My Deere 455 riding mower equipped with a 60-in. deck and Meg-Mow disc blades (www.meg-mo.com) is my best buy."

Melvin Fisher, Lebanon, Penn.: "My 2007 Toro Z4200 zero turn riding mower equipped with a 42-in. deck is my best buy. The deck is easy to remove for cleaning. Even though the mower comes with a hose connection fitting on the deck, I like to remove the deck and clean it with a pressure washer. The mower has a 3-year warranty."

Wilford Secker, Selby, S. Dak.: "My 2002 Toyota Camry has more than 148,000 miles on it but still runs like new and has been trouble-free. It gets 32 to 38 mpg."

"My Minnesota gravity box equipped with a 12-ton running gear is my worst buy. The frame and axles on it bent after only a dozen loads, even though we were hauling less

weight than it was rated for. Now we use Kilbros wagon boxes and gears, which are built much better."

Marshall Cox, Ravenswood, W. Va.: Marshall likes his Deere X495 riding mower. "Over the years I've owned many other Deere mowers including models 322, 425, and 455. Their mowers just keep getting better and better. No problems."

"My Stihl 250 Weedeater has more than 1,000 trouble-free hours on it. Works great."

Brian Seckman, Weston, W. Va.: Brian's impressed with his 1970 Chevrolet C-30 truck. "I bought this truck from a family friend who used it to haul cattle to and from the stockyards. I use it to haul big firewood-butt logs that I use in my Taylor outdoor woodburning stove. This truck is a real workhorse - it'll handle whatever I load it up with."

Jay C. Reiner, Stewart, Minn.: "My 2006 Arctic Cat 2-WD ATV equipped with a 250 cc engine is my best buy. It has plenty of power and it's a joy to ride. Great for either work or play."

On the minus side, he lists his 2005 A-Maize-ing Heat corn burning furnace. "The dealer told me this furnace could burn corn, wood pellets, or even cherry pits. However, the first time I tried it - using all wood pellets - the auger motor burned out at a cost of \$100. The outside temperature was 10 degrees below zero so I had to hand feed the stove every hour or so just to keep our house warm. The dealer said I should mix the pellets with corn instead of using just pellets. I wish he would have told me that sooner. Another problem is the stove doesn't work properly whenever the outside temperature is above 30 degrees. It can be 78 degrees inside the house yet the furnace will still kick in even though no heat is needed. It uses about 50 lbs. of corn per day."

"Another problem is the dealer doesn't know any more about how the furnace works than I did when I bought it. I've called the company several times but get only a recording, and my calls are never returned. The company needs to make this furnace easier to light. At times I had to use a whole \$7 bottle of starter gel, yet still couldn't get the furnace going. It's cheaper to just keep it going and waste one bushel of corn than to hassle with trying to start it up every day. I'd never buy another one and don't recommend them to anyone."

Paul Evinck, Jamestown, N.Y.: "My Xtreme Charge XC 100 5-stage maintenance charger is my best buy (PulseTech Products Corp., ph 800 580-7554; www.pulsetech.net). I've used it to restore a number of sulfated batteries. It has the ability to remove lead sulfate crystals from the lead plates so they will then accept a charge. It also increases a battery's cranking amps and results in longer battery life - up to three times longer. Pulse Tech has a variety of battery problem solving chargers and maintainers."

Gary Heckathorn, Navarre, Ohio: "My 1988 Stihl FS81 Weed Trimmer has been trouble-free. It's hard to beat Stihl for ease of starting and rugged service. Their products run when you need them to, and they're not always in the shop for repairs. You get your money's worth."

Rich Hennig, Lisco, Neb.: "My worst buy is my Ariens 1434 Mini-Zoom riding mower. It's underpowered, and the idler pulleys are the riveted type that keep breaking because of belt tension. The pulleys cost more than \$100 from the dealer, but only about \$20 from the NAPA store. Also, the electric clutch kicks in so fast that often the belt comes off whenever the clutch is engaged. It's not a good machine."

"Owner's Report" On Do-It-Yourself Pellet Machines

With soaring corn prices, there's tremendous interest in pellets made out of wood, corn stalks, grass or other low-cost products - primarily to burn in corn stoves. Pellet Pro, owned by Illinois farmers, imports a farm-sized pelletizer from China (ph 309 852-3625; www.pelletpro.com). We featured Pellet Pro's machine in a story last year (Vol. 31, No. 3). Recently, we contacted a few "early adopters" to see how it's working out.



Steve Law, Mantorville, Minn.: "I bought the smaller Pellet Pro machine with a 7 hp electric motor. The machine is fine for what it is - a low-cost unit. Most pellet-making machines are big commercial units that cost \$500,000 or more. I paid just \$2,800 and so far I've made pellets from alfalfa with corn distilling byproducts added and also from chopped soybean residue and distillers grain. It all depends on the ratio of water or oil to dried materials. If you get it just right, it'll make decent pellets."

"I've had trouble making pellets hard enough to feed through the two augers on my corn stove. They break up before they get to the firebox. However, I made some pellets for a friend who has a newer stove that gravity feeds from the top and he says they work great."

"The dies on the Pellet Pro are poorly designed so I made my own, which works a little better. I feed sheep and have been making pretty decent alfalfa pellets for them with 10 to 15 percent distiller's grain added for protein - and to make the pellets a little harder. For burning, I use soybean stalks mixed with distiller's grain."

"Anything you pelletize has to fit through a 1/4-in. screen."

"I'd recommend going to a bigger machine with a 15 hp diesel engine. It's rated at 650 lbs. per hour, has bigger rollers, and is not so temperamental to moisture content."

Merlin Wooley, Beaverton, Mich.: "My unit is for sale. I just can't get it to work. The company sent me a bigger die which helped some but I can't make burnable pellets out of wood byproducts, which is what I bought it for. The pellets just fall apart, even though the company told me it should work fine. I paid \$3,500 for it."

"It might work better with distiller byproducts, which are more like putty. I wanted to use shavings from a wood flooring mill, which are coarser than sawdust."

"When I contacted the company, they gave me a recipe they said is guaranteed to work: 12 cups sawdust, 6 cups soybeans, and 1/2 cup water. But I don't want to have to go out and buy soybeans, especially at today's prices."

"After I got the machine to my shop, it leaked oil. A coupling between the motor and power shaft was out of line. I had to redrill holes and grind down the welds."

"I bought the machine because 40-lb. bags of wood pellets are selling for \$4.75 right now and I thought I could get something going. I'm disappointed. If you're interested in a machine, I recommend you take the material you want to pelletize to Pellet Pro first and try it out."

Joe Duffy, Hornell, N.Y.: "Last year FARM SHOW published a report on my Pellet Pro machine and I had responses from individuals and manufacturers across the country who had ideas for making it work. But I finally gave up and took it back to the company. They gave me my money back."

"I found that it works good on softer food materials like soybeans and distiller's grain but not so good on wood products. I have a sawmill and wanted to use my own sawdust. The company suggested I mix it with distillery byproducts but we don't have an ethanol plant anywhere near here. And besides, the byproducts cost \$125 a ton."

"I don't give up easily and tried different moisture contents. Nothing worked."

Ted Walrich, Colton, N.Y. (ph 315 265-2127 or walrichp@northnet.org): "It's the only do-it-yourself pellet-making machine out there and I have nothing bad to say about it. But then, I am a dealer. However, I didn't become one until after I bought a machine and found out how well it works. To make good quality pellets, you just have to find the best method."

"It doesn't make any difference what the material is but there are certain procedures to follow for different kinds of materials. The company doesn't provide the best set of instructions but they haven't been in business that long and are still figuring everything out themselves."

"There are two basic kinds of materials to make pellets from: Dry products like grasses, cornstalks or sawdust; and wet products like distiller's grains, green sawdust, and other products with 16 to 40 percent moisture content."

"With dry material, you have to add a binding agent to make a good pellet. The good thing about working with dry material is that it's ready to burn when the pellets come out. "With wet material, you often don't need a binder but when they come out, they're too wet to burn. So you have to go through a drying process to bring them down to 12 to 13 percent moisture to burn successfully in a stove."

"We're all new at this so there's a lot of experimenting going on. It's almost more of an art form than a science. For example, there's a big difference between sawdust from hardwoods and sawdust from soft woods, and it makes a difference if you're using a circular sawmill or a bandsaw mill, which has much finer sawdust."

"It would be nice if there were a detailed pellet maker's manual but there isn't. I may scare some customers off by telling them the facts, but I'd rather do that up front than have them buy a machine and not be happy."

"It's important to chop material up so it fits through a 1/4-in. screen. You can't just take hay off a big bale and pelletize it. I kiln-dry my own lumber and use shavings from our planers and joiners and I have to run them through a hammermill so there are no chunks or long slivers to plug up."

"There are three different electric-powered models, a diesel-powered model, and a pto-powered model. Capacity ranges from 65 to 650 lbs. per hour."

"There's tremendous interest in pelletizing right now. It's been a learning process for the whole company."