

Buyer's Guide to Small Farm Utility Vehicles

For work and play, these tough utility machines can get the job done on the hobby farm.

By Sarah Christie

About the Author:

Sarah Christie is a freelance writer and long-time hobby rancher. Farm utility vehicles, also known as cargo all-terrain vehicles (CATV), or simply, "utes," are the latest "must have" item for family farmers, ranchers and growers.

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Utility Vehicle In Action!

Hobby Farms Managing Editor Sarah Coleman, above right, put Yamaha's Rhino 700 to the test in a recreation area in the northeast mountains of Tennessee. I once co-managed a polo club in a resort community that enjoyed an inexhaustible supply of used golf carts. The grooms and exercise riders came up with some inventive modifications for those light-duty vehicles.

They converted them to flatbeds, fed the horses off of them, installed electrical plugs for running herbicide sprayers and clippers, mounted spindles on the back for stretching wire and even used them for leading strings of polo ponies back and forth from the barns to the paddocks.

Little did I know that those souped-up golf carts were the forerunners of the modern day farm utility vehicle.

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Utility Vehicle Benefits

Depending on the make, model and options, utility vehicles combine the versatility of a small tractor, the maneuverability of an ATV and the utility of a Jeep.

They can reach speeds of up to 25 mph, roll over muddy stream banks or wet grass without leaving a track, and take the place of a pack string on a weekend camping trip.

Recommended Brands

Arctic Cat
www.arcticcat.com
(218) 681-8558

Bobcat
www.bobcat.com
(800) 743-4340

Cub Cadet
www.cubcadet.com

Club Car
www.clubcar.com

Gorilla Vehicles
www.gorillavehicles.com
(714) 377-7776

Honda
www.honda.com
(770) 497-6400

John Deere

www.johndeere.com
(866) 993-3373

Kawasaki
www.kawasaki.com
(800) 661-RIDE

Polaris
www.polarisindustries.com

Pug
www.pugcatv.com
(866) PUG-CATV

Toro
www.toro.com
(800) 348-2424

Yamaha
www.yamaha-motor.com

(800) 962-7926 At the risk of invoking images of late night TV commercials advertising blenders that double as helicopters, it is entirely possible to purchase a utility vehicle that mows grass, plows snow, hauls up to a ton of feed or material, dumps dirt, scrapes snow, tows, accommodates spray attachments and negotiates 4-wheel-drive terrain all with same driver comfort as a small pickup truck.

Hard to believe? Utility vehicles have caught the attention of fire crews, search-and-rescue teams, municipalities and the National Park Service. Hunters who haven't got the patience to wrangle livestock appreciate the ease with which they can pack in their gear and pack out an elk without ever having to throw a diamond hitch.

For backcountry users, the appeal of a multi-use vehicle is its versatility, functionality and ease of use. Larry Williams is a spokesman for Pug Inc., one of the first manufacturers of utility vehicles.

He works at the Pug factory in Jackson, Miss., and says utility vehicle sales have surged in recent years, partly because they are catching on as work/play vehicles. Pug has a 6-wheel model that is articulated in the middle, to bend around trees and other obstacles.

"They can go places you thought you could only get to with a mule, and carry 10 times as much," says Williams. "And you can also make them street-legal and drive them to the mall. I've seen one parked down at the Wal-Mart with blinkers and tags and a walker in the back."

Diverse Uses on Small Farms

The needs of small-scale farmers and ranchers are as diverse as their operations. Tractors can perform a variety of functions, but they are big and slow, and thus overkill for many jobs.

Pickup trucks can't get in and out of tight places. ATVs are quick and maneuverable, but limited in terms of how much they can carry. Mike Henline, spokesman for Bobcat, says their new "Toolcat" work machine is based on feedback from people who wanted a single machine with a multitude of abilities. The result is sort of like the "Swiss Army Knife" of utility vehicles.

Quadrunners

Traveling solo? Need to get there in a hurry? Consider an ATV-style "quadrunner," such as the Kawasaki Prairie or the Suzuki Eiger.

Gone are the old three-wheelers—too dangerous and prone to flipping. The new models have four wheels, but the machines are smaller and only carry one person.

You still straddle them like a motorbike, but they are much more stable. Still, it is advisable to take advantage of the manufacturer's free safety course if it is offered through your local dealer.

Quadranners can be equipped with a tow hitch or racks, but they are not designed for payload capacity.

What they do offer is maneuverability, and speed—reaching up to 65 mph. This is the perfect machine for herding cattle, checking fences or pipelines, or any other job that requires increased responsiveness and the ability to get around in a hurry.

Trailers, spreaders, carts, baskets, tillers and more for your utility vehicle ... check out these manufacturers:

Agri-Fab
(217) 728-8388
www.agri-fab.com

Featherlite Inc.
(800) 800-1230
www.featherliteinc.com

Mill Creek Manufacturing Co.
(800) 311-1323
www.millcreekspreaders.com

Roda Manufacturing Inc.
(888) 214-9914
www.rodamfg.com

Swisher Inc.
(660) 747-8183
www.swisherinc.com

Worksaver
(217) 324-5973

www.worksaver.com "Equipment users told us they were looking for a good-steering machine that would work well on all surfaces, and versatile enough to handle several applications," says Henline. "This includes grounds maintenance, mowing, snow removal, ground leveling, lifting pallets, planting trees and shrubs as well as fencing and decorative landscaping. The customers were also looking for a machine that had 4-wheel drive and could travel quickly from jobsite to jobsite, with the ability to carry supplies and a co-worker."

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UTEs are Comfortable

In addition to its capacity for work, utes are almost as comfortable to drive and ride as a traditional automobile. Independent suspension and rack-and-pinion steering provide a remarkably driver-friendly feel.

For those that offer more than just "forward and back" options, hydrostatic transmissions allow for shifting on the fly. The meatier models can hit speeds of up to 25 mph, making the addition of a windshield or a full cab a welcome option.

Manual or hydraulic dump beds are standard on most models, and tow hitches can be added for greater versatility.

In fact, there are so many accessory opportunities, the greatest challenge in customizing a utility vehicle may be narrowing your choices to the features you really need.

But before adding the bells and whistles, buyers would be wise to make more basic choices about the vehicle itself, like the size and type of engine, payload capacity, and whether 4-wheel drive is a necessity.

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ENGINES

Gas:

Gasoline engines have an advantage over diesel for most owners when it comes to economy, convenience and noise. Gasoline is readily available, the engines are relatively easy to repair, not to mention quieter to run than a diesel. The units are typically less expensive than diesel varieties, and simple oil changes and routine maintenance can be done at home.

While it's true that gasoline is slightly more expensive than diesel, and gas engines are less fuel efficient, the margin will hardly be noticed in the four- to five-gallon gas tanks.

Diesel:

Diesel units are more expensive than gas-powered engines, for both purchase and repair, but the additional cost is offset by increased power, longevity and reduced maintenance. Diesel engines have more torque, which translates into more load-carrying capacity and greater pulling power. The diesel engine's fuel injection system eliminates the need for tune-ups and spark plugs, and the unit generally enjoys a longer lifetime. "When they break down, repairs can be expensive," says Mark Jensen, a sales representative for Kawasaki and New Holland in Brenham, Texas. "But that's only if they break down, and they are generally very dependable machines." Diesel vehicles of all types hold their value better than gasoline-powered vehicles, and thus it can be argued that they are a better investment. But that will only benefit those who decide to sell at some point in the future.

Electric:

One of the latest innovations in utility vehicles is the advent of the electric engine. Long popular in golf carts for their quietness, electric engines also have other advantages, such as increased responsiveness and zero emissions. Plus, as long as you have access to a power outlet, they never run out of fuel. Properly charged and maintained (you will need to check the water level in the batteries regularly), an electric vehicle should be able to run for a full day. Overall engine maintenance is generally low, but when the time comes to replace the batteries, expect to pay in the neighborhood of \$500, as all will need to be replaced.

Steve Reed owns a John Deere dealership in Stockton, Calif. The gasoline- and diesel-powered Gators have been popular with farmers, ranchers and commercial growers for years, but Reed says the electric E-Gator is a popular choice for applications where noise is an issue. "When you've got golf courses, vineyards and orchards that you have to get to work in before dawn, people appreciate the electric engine," says Reed. "Agricultural operators on small acreage and golf courses ringed by houses have to be considerate of their neighbors."

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DRIVE TRAIN

Washington County Tractors in Brenham, Texas, was one of the first Kawasaki dealers to sell the Kawasaki Mule back in 1989. Mark Jensen still remembers the first one he ever saw, on the back of the sales rep's truck. "I recall thinking, 'I know a lot of customers that this will solve a lot of problems for.'"

He was right. Jensen says that today, with so many makes and models on the market, many of his customers have more than one utility vehicle in their garage. But for those who have to choose just one, it's a good idea to make a realistic assessment of the kind of work you expect to be performing before choosing 2- or 4-wheel drive, or 4-wheel drive with two extra wheels. **2-Wheel Drive:**

Two-wheel drive makes sense for light work in undemanding circumstances. "If you are mainly concerned with transportation on flat ground, and carrying a little bit of cargo like a bale of hay or a few sacks of feed, then 2-wheel drive is probably a good way to go," says Jensen. "They are smaller, lighter machines, which is good if you aren't going to be doing a lot of heavy work." A 2-wheel-drive machine is less expensive than 4-wheel drive, gets slightly better gas mileage, and some can fit in the back of a pickup truck, making for easy transport.

4-Wheel Drive:

For work on rough, steep or muddy ground, or jobs that require lots of material or heavy equipment, a 4-wheel-drive machine is in order. Getting stuck in the mud or in the bottom of a ravine will bring a premature end to any job. Four-wheel-drive units must have stronger engines with a lower gear ratio to engage all four wheels. As a result, they can also haul heavier loads and tow more easily. Their heavier frames are built to withstand more abuse. "The larger machines get worked harder," explains Jensen. "But they still handle well and don't leave a track. In the mud, your footprint will be deeper than the tire track." This is important for applications where it is crucial not to leave a mark on turf, or to protect sensitive areas around creeks and streams.

6 Wheels:

Six-wheel vehicles have the best traction of all, with 4-wheel drive and two extra wheels to distribute the weight. They can handle the biggest payload, up to a ton in some models, and are the vehicle of choice for farmers who work in vineyards and orchards, or ranchers who carry lots of gear and materials. Because the weight is distributed over six tires, they leave almost no trace of their passage, making them popular vehicles for golf courses and estate landscape maintenance. Of course, with six tires, you have a 50 percent higher chance of getting a flat tire, and two extra tires to replace when they go bald.

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HORSEPOWER

Utility vehicle engines run the gamut from 8 horsepower to 18 horsepower. Generally speaking, the more you intend to do with your ute, the more horsepower you'll need. If you plan to use attachments, or tow a trailer, you'll need a bigger engine. Likewise, 4-wheel-drive vehicles will, by definition, have more horsepower.

But horsepower can be deceptive, so you have to evaluate the size of the engine with the payload capacity. If you are comparing brands, and one model has more horsepower but the payload is the same, the bigger engine will just cost you more money and burn more fuel.

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OPTIONAL ACCESSORIES

Once you've decided on the basics, it's time to customize your ute. This is where the fun begins. It's easy to get carried away with the extras, but the reality is you'll probably use every feature you pick over the life of the vehicle.

Of course not all models offer all options, so you may have to decide between brand, and bells and whistles. Selecting your options can feel a little like a trip to the power-tool buffet. **Dump Bed:**

Manual or hydraulic, dump beds come in handy for cleaning stalls, hauling dirt, bedding and mulch, and a variety of landscape and small construction projects.

Windshield:

It won't keep you dry in the rain, but it will keep your hat from blowing off at 25 mph, and improve your visibility in thick fog or light rain.

Cab:

Hard side or soft side, a cab adds comfort and protection from sun, wind, rain and snow. If you intend to use your ute year-round, a cab will pay for itself in a single season.

Snow Blade:

An obvious improvement over a snow shovel, with less investment than a full-size snowplow. A blade can do double duty pushing dirt or leveling driveways in the dry season.

Sprayer:

With a pump that draws off the engine, power sprayers anchored in the bed of a ute can spray herbicides, liquid fertilizer, or other agricultural chemicals much more quickly and evenly than a backpack sprayer.

Vacuum Cleaner:

This attachment doubles as a street sweeper, and is a useful choice for estates or livestock facilities that must keep their public or work areas spotless.

Ball Field Finisher:

Schools, golf courses and athletic fields have a need to groom their turf surfaces to a high gloss. The rubber nubbed fingers "comb" the grass to uniform perfection.

Rumble Seat:

A new accessory not yet widely available in the industry, a detachable backseat can increase seating capacity to a total of five.

Tow Ball:

Welded to the frame, a tow ball gives you the ability to tow a small flatbed trailer, chipper, splitter, arena drag or other implement weighing up to 1,200 lbs.

Utility vehicles will never replace full-size tractors or pickup trucks on the homestead, but they can provide transportation options for farmers, ranchers, commercial growers and landscapers.

Their application to a wide range of farm tasks, not to mention their ability to get off the farm and out into the woods, make them an attractive choice for those who are looking for the quickest way to get a job done.

Fast without being dangerous, strong without being overpowering, the new generation of work vehicles has an established place in the well-equipped agricultural operation for a wide variety of light, medium and heavy-duty assignments.

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