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Up a tree without a rope

The recent batch of innovative and usual access platforms provide arborists with a better choice of equipment than ever for working at height, helping the industry build on the progress it has made towards reducing the number of falls recorded each year.

Falls from height are the biggest cause of workplace deaths and one of the biggest causes of major injury. In tree work, falls from height are still common in spite of the recent improvements and the result is often death or major injury. According to the UK HSE statistics, around 16 percent of all reported tree work accidents involve falling from height while a further six percent are due to uncontrolled swings in the tree leading to impact with branches or the trunk when climbing using ropes.

The use of aerial work platforms for tree care operations is not new. However, what is new is the increasing variety of platforms available both to purchase and more widely available for rent. While the take up of powered access has been growing rapidly, there is still a good deal of resistance among

many arborists, often based on negative experiences and/or ignorance of the wide range of machines now available. Selecting the wrong piece of equipment, whatever the job, will often put a company or user off of the entire concept. And simply using a machine because it is the only one readily available or within a nominal budget is no excuse and a clear indicator of inadequate work planning! There have been and will continue to be incidents where health and safety, not to mention efficiency, is compromised if the wrong type of platform is used.

The introduction of the Work at Height Regulations 2005 (WAHR) meant that the arboricultural industry needed to rethink its approach to tree work and resulted in a number campaigns and clamp down's by the HSE, resulting in an increasing number of contractors



The arborist's choice - a tracked spider



using powered access. This led to the publication by the Arboricultural Association of its 'Guide to the use of MEWPs in Arboriculture' in October 2008, which follows the basic principle of doing "all that is reasonably practicable to prevent anyone falling..."



The guide was put together with the help of a number of experts, including the HSE and IPAF and addresses every aspect of using powered access when working with trees, covering everything from legal considerations, selecting the right machine and setting it up properly,

to the use of MEWPs in tree work, safety equipment and rescue work. The book - which is certainly worth a read even if you are not involved in tree work - includes plenty of colour photographs, suggests layouts for risk assessment, method statement forms and other planning tools.

Six or seven ago there was a real reluctance from arborists to give up climbing - particularly from the younger, more agile tree workers who saw it as one of the main areas that defined their profession. The adoption of the aerial work platform meant that older tree workers that were no longer able to climb, could still have a hands-on role, and surprisingly to some, added the benefit of being able to work longer and faster. While there are still those who will always want to climb, more and more tree workers are selecting platforms first - helped along by 'working at height' legislation and their increasing popularity and availability.

Like the steel erectors before them (and many industries in general), arborists have been slow to accept mechanised access across the wider industry.



22 metre Ascendant truck mount



But their increasing awareness and acceptance of the access platform has coincided with the general growth of powered access, the increasing variety of platforms available and the growing realisation that it is not a pure cost. Five years ago, it wasn't just arborists that were unaware of the tracked spider lift. While its popularity has grown enormously since then, there are still a vast number of potential users that are still blissfully unaware of its existence. To be fair, arborists are now probably one of the 'better informed' sectors when it comes to access equipment as it is central to their day to day operations. Fortunately, platforms - particularly tracked spider lifts - have developed greatly in recent years. Equipment is also now appearing that is either designed specifically for the

arborist, or is far more suited to their operational needs, than anything that has gone before. Trees don't stop growing - even in a severe recession - although a lot of tree work is seasonal or has to work around restricted times such as the bird nesting season. Most of the tree work undertaken involves improving the form and removing defects (formative pruning); the removal of lower branches to increase clearance beneath the canopy (lifting); removing secondary branches from within the crown to reduce density giving even growth (thinning); removing defects such as dead wood, diseased, crossing and rubbing branches (crown cleaning) and the removal of outer branches to suitable growth points to reduce the crown's overall size or removing selected areas to reshape

asymmetrical crowns (crown reduction and reshaping).

The type of client ordering this type of work ranges from individual homeowners with a single tree to large corporations and Local Authorities responsible for whole tree populations. And depending on the situation and location of the tree, may require a variety of different equipment - or not!

One machine that has been specifically designed for urban and forest tree work is the Mecaplus ME12SL - a self levelling, 12 metre working height articulated boom lift with an automatic levelling system that does away with outriggers. The unit has just won the IPAF product of the year in 'The European Rental

Awards 2010' and was first seen in the UK at Vertikal Days in 2009. The Spanish-based company emerged from the tree pruning industry and has more than 20 years experience as working arborists. The company's practical experience shines through in the machine's design.

There are several innovative features on the ME12SL primarily the dynamic self levelling system and 'foot' controls in the basket although other features such as clean lines - uncluttered by cables, pipes or hoses - and 3mm thick steel covers help to protect the unit from falling branches and snagging.

But perhaps the most significant feature on the Mecaplus machine is its self-levelling system which automatically and constantly levels the chassis on side slopes of up to 32 percent and up to 15 percent longitudinally. For the arborist this overcomes one of the most significant dangers - using equipment on a slope. The unit includes an oscillating front axle which as well as contributing to the machine's levelling ability keeps the drive wheels in permanent contact with the ground. The unit can also be driven in most positions when elevated.

To maintain high productivity, all the controls for the machine's boom movements are located on the basket floor and controlled by the operator's feet, allowing the operator to use both hands for chain saws and other equipment, dramatically increasing productivity and safety. The shrouding around



Mecaplus ME12SL with automatic self levelling



The ME12SL has 7.6 metres outreach, 340 degrees slew and 180 degrees basket rotation

An option on the Mecaplus is rubber tracks



the foot controls has been improved recently to allowing more space to cope with industrial footwear. The ME 12SL also has three compressed air line outlets in the basket allowing a variety of pneumatic tools to be used as well as a 220 volt electric outlet.

The platform's maximum outreach of 7.6 metres varies depending on whether there is one person (120kg) in the basket or two (200kg) cutting the outreach to 6.3 metres. With 340 degrees slew and 180 degrees basket rotation, the machine can manoeuvre itself to deal with most



Palazzini TZX220

of the above tasks. Other features of the five tonne platform include an extra large diesel tank allowing all-day operation, oil and temperature alarms, four wheel drive, rubber tracks or foam filled tyres.

Mecaplus says that it intends to add larger machines, with 16, 18 and 21 metre working heights as well as introducing telescopic boom and jib options. This reflects the increasing demand from arborists for self propelled lifts with 18 to 23 metre platform heights. Whilst the specifically designed Mecaplus can cope with all types of tree work, it is particularly beneficial for series type work, such as the pruning of long avenues of trees, or forestry/orchard work. For many other types of tree work, there are now plenty of regular types of lift that are well suited to other applications.

For operations in or alongside the street for example, van and truck mounted platforms can be used. Obviously the standard products do not have foot mounted controls and cannot be driven at height, but they are road going vehicles and are ideal where only road registered vehicles can operate or for work



Merlo MPR 15



Tracked spiders can be driven to the work area

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that does not require constant repositioning. The new electric and semi-electric powered truck and van mounted platforms from Versalift would be ideal in that they are environmentally friendly (both emissions and noise) and the electric power is ideally suited for short distance, stop/start cycles where the platform could drive back to its local depot each evening for a battery recharge.

Surprisingly trailer lifts remain popular with arborists. Accepting their manoeuvrability limitations, the platforms are less expensive to hire or buy, easy and quick to set up for short duration work and being relatively light, they can be easily towed behind the tree worker's 4x4 or truck.

Of course for trees in back gardens, areas across soft ground or where a width restriction limits access, something special is required and the spider lift fits the bill. The vast majority of tracked spider lifts sold and available for hire have a working height of between 13 and 17 metres although a whole raft of new product launches this year will take the 'mass market' spider up to around 23 metres. Only a handful of manufacturers offer tracked spiders of more than 30 metres and due to their limited numbers yet high demand, hiring one often involves long-term planning or a long wait.

However, the tracked spider lift has all the features to make it THE access platform all-rounder and 'jack of all trades'. All are compact for the working height, usually narrow and low enough to pass through a standard door opening and therefore can easily track down the side passage of a house and negotiate the tight turn at the bottom. Being small they are easy to transport either in the back of a van, on a small truck or with some of the smaller versions - such as the 12.7 metre Teupen Leo 13GT with lightweight trailer - can come in under 1.9 tonnes all up giving a GVW of less than 3.5 tonnes.

As its popularity grows, there is now a healthy number of machines available for rent in the 13 to 23 metre working height range and with increased competition, rates are becoming very reasonable. As mentioned earlier, the larger spiders are still in very thin on the ground but if needs must, are available up to 50 metres.

One relative newcomer is the Giraf Track, a combination of a tracked excavator and a telehandler boom resulting in an 18 tonne machine that has a working height up to 20 metres. It can level on slopes up to 24 degrees and lift 3.8 tonnes.

There is very little if anything on the market that offers this specification and with a good size platform could be very useful in the arborist's armoury.

Another recently launched machine that may arouse the interest of the tree workers comes from Merlo, which have already touched some parts of the market with its telehandlers - with or without platforms. Following its recent entry into the spider lift market, the company has yet again pushed the innovative and usual boat out with its MRP15 and 18. Its four metre by two metre platform, 1,000kg lift capacity, full self propelled ability, lateral outreach, levelling ability, 4x4x4 drive and steer and 40 km per hour road speed could make it absolutely ideal for Local Authority tree work in the street for removing lower branches and raising the canopy or across fields or in other hard to reach places.

The more affluent or larger tree companies tend to have a 'go anywhere' Unimog on the fleet - many using its PTO to power a large chipper to reduce and recycle the cut branches, trunks and stumps to chip. Current Unimog based work platforms (from Versalift and Oil&Steel) are largely aimed at the power generation sector that needs the vehicle to cross fields to access electricity poles - a similar scenario to some arborists. A less expensive option is a Land Rover (or similar) based platform of which there are now several to choose from with the latest from Cumberland/Socage and SkyKing.

While there are some tree operations (thinning for example) that are not as easy to carry out with a platform and may require some climbing, it can still be accomplished using the right platform with adequate working height and more importantly, outreach. Small, round single person baskets can also help to get into the crown of the tree and a grid type floor in the bottom prevents sawdust building up. Speed and safety are the key words.



Out on a limb



A Land Rover-based platform



A Merlo telehandler with basket



This weeping Ash was too dangerous to climb



A Teupen Leo30 in Epping forest



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