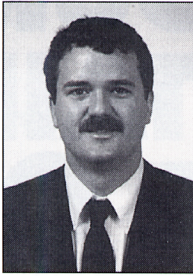


# MacKissic, Merry Tiller And More

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**A**fter thriving independently under the Merry and Allberry families of Washington's Puget Sound area for 34 years, the Merry Tiller line of chain-driven garden tillers entered a period of instability in 1981, when it was sold to Brady & Associates of Birmingham, Ala. In 1983, due to operating difficulties, Brady ceased manufacturing but continued to supply Merry Tiller parts and accessories.

In 1984, Brady & Associates sold Merry Tiller's assets to an individual who seemed ready to grow the company with new products and aggressive selling, but he in turn sold it to Citation Carolina Corp. in 1988. Soon after, it was discovered the seller had significantly overstated Merry Tiller's inventory and accounts receivable. This led to Citation carrying a heavy debt load and eventual unprofitability.

Enter MacKissic Inc., which purchased the Merry Tiller line in 1991, bringing the well-known product back into the arms of a full-service lawn and garden manufacturer after the string of unsuccessful ownerships. The move coincided with other MacKissic actions, such as selling off the Amerind segment of its operation to concentrate more fully on its main area of expertise—the lawn and garden market.

When purchasing Merry Tiller, MacKissic also expanded its Parker Ford, Pa. plant's manufacturing space by 15% and invested in new manufacturing machinery such as CNC tooling, robotic equipment and a new powder coat painting process. In a conversation with MacKissic Vice President Rick Dhein, PET looks at the process of a company that has taken a formerly popular but drifting product and brought it back to prominence in the industry.

**PET: Tell our readers about MacKissic's purchase of the Merry Tiller line.**

We bought it in April of 1991, and we moved everything from Birmingham, Ala. up here to Parker Ford, Pa. to our plant where we make the Mighty Mac products. It was a real natural for us because Merry Tiller has a long established name and a great reputation. The product has been around almost 50 years and MacKissic as a company has also been in business almost 50 years as a manufacturer. We have Mighty Mac products that are well respected as a high quality brand, so the Merry Tiller fit into our organization real well.



**MacKissic moves with Merry Tiller.**

**PET: Did you make any changes to the product once you purchased it?**

We had looked at Merry Tiller a few times before, and we're the product's fifth owner in 10 years. When you look at being the fifth owner in 10 years, most people would say, "Stay away from that company. It can't make a buck and it's probably got a bad reputation in the marketplace." Well, we studied it and found that Merry Tiller, in spite of being beaten around the last 10 years, still had a good name, had great name recognition, was known as a durable quality product, especially in the rental trade, and was a product in demand.

When we bought it we realized things had been changed in the operations down in Birmingham. They had tried to make some changes, take some costs out. So we went back to the original

quality that the product had when it was built in the state of Washington. We didn't really make any modifications except to go back the way they had it before. We used heavier gauge steel, and we still have the best time in the market. We use better chain in there, changed the way it was welded—those kinds of things.

We took it back to the original quality, and when we first showed it at EXPO as well as the national rental show, the dealers and rental stores just welcomed us with open arms because we had gone back to the original quality—which is what they remembered and were used to.

**PET: In what specific areas did MacKissic believe the Merry Tiller had lost quality?**

(The former owners) still had the old original specifications that were required, and they were just not following through on them. We are the product's first owner in 10 years that knows outdoor power equipment and manufacturing. The others didn't really understand the lawn and garden business. They weren't buying the right type of steel and using the right methods for welding, that sort of thing. They had cheapened the handle design, weren't using the right kind of steel for that or the proper welding, because it wasn't penetrating.

(On the handle), we went back to the original method where you punch a hole, slip the handle down in it and then weld around that. It's a much stronger design. In the transmission itself, we went back to the original specs, with better chain and sprockets.

**PET: What kind of impact have these changes had on sales?**

Well, we know the business, we know distribution, we know the rental business and we're also a manufacturer. I think that helped people buy our product the first year in. We didn't know exactly where the sales were going, but what I did was forecast 18 months of the previous company's sales for a 12 month period. Well, we sold that out in about