

# Earth Tools: Owen County's best-kept secret

*Owen County is home to North America's largest retailer of walk-behind tractors*

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JOEL DUFOUR STARTED EARTH TOOLS after relocating from Indiana to his wife's family land on the Owen-Franklin County line. Today, the business, located on Kays Branch Road, is the largest retailer of walk-behind tractors in North America. Dufour attributes the success of the business to his knowledgeable employees, their attention to detail and unmatched customer service. — Photo by Amanda Anderson Matthews

Joel Dufour repaired his first walk-behind tractor engine in 1980. He was 10 years old and has been doing it ever since. In the years since he worked for his dad in Indiana, repairing and selling two-wheel tractors, he has learned much about what it takes to build a solid business.

*"If something is worth doing, it's worth doing right."*

He takes that lesson from his father and applies it to his life and work.

Dufour started Earth Tools in 1998 after marrying his wife, Chris, and moving from Indiana to her family's land on the Owen-Franklin County line. He began with the gritty determination that has led him through most of his endeavors: living off-grid, raising two daughters, and starting a solar business in coal country. The business began in his shed, as so many good ideas tend to, and grew from there.

And folks drive from all over to southern Owen County's Kays Branch Road for one reason: they want tractors. Specifically, walk-behind tractors. Dufour's knowledge and respect for the tractor and its usefulness on the farm took him from working out of his shed to being the largest retailer of walk-behind tractors in North America.

So, what is a walk-behind tractor, and why do people drive from as far as Oregon to get them? Essentially, it's a two-wheeled tractor that can perform most functions of the larger four-wheeled tractors, depending on the implement attached to it. The tractors can plow, mow, tow, mark rows, blow snow, and bale the cutest hay bales anyone has ever seen. The tractors are versatile and have a small footprint, which makes them appealing to small-scale and market farmers. But what makes Earth Tools so unique?

The people.

It should come as no surprise to residents of Owen County that the folks working at Earth Tools are the salt of the earth, and that's why people continue to support the company. The customers get top-of-the-line, quality customer service. Remember that? It still exists and is the key to Earth Tools' success. Earth Tools is a small company considering its claim as the largest retailer of walk-behind tractors in North America, but the 15 employees import, build and ship out a lot of tractors. And parts and accessories, and don't forget the hand tools.

But let's get back to the people and what made Earth Tools the success it is today. When a customer calls to buy a tractor, one of the salespeople will spend time matching a tractor to the customer's specific needs, uses, and the land they inhabit. David Hosey, a salesperson at Earth Tools, explains that his job is to ensure the customer is getting the right tractor for today and tomorrow.

"Understanding the differences in tractors is the main job, and that takes time," Hosey explained.

This attention to detail, the customer's needs, and the Earth Tools employees' vast knowledge and experience with the product make this experience exceptional.

Dennis Berry, who has been with Earth Tools since February 2010 and oversees inventory and parts, believes that the key to Earth Tools' success is the personal attention each customer receives.

"When a customer calls, it doesn't matter how long it takes; someone here can answer their questions and walk them through a solution," Berry said. "And when customers call, they always get a person on the line."

One of the true marvels at Earth Tools is how incredibly knowledgeable every single employee is about the products, and if one person doesn't know the answer, someone there does. The employees at Earth Tools want their customers to succeed, so they invest the time. This is no accident, Dufour designed it this way. You can't order from Earth Tools online. You must call.

"It's our 100 percent personal service and complete commitment to quality that makes us stand out," Dufour said.

Quality is essential at Earth Tools. When a customer purchases a tractor, technicians fully assemble it in the build room. They make any modifications the customer requests. The tractor is then inspected, usually by Dufour, to ensure there are always extra eyes checking the quality

before it gets shipped. Imagine receiving something in the mail that didn't require assembly. Earth Tools wants customers to use the tractor right off the pallet. Constantly checking and overseeing all the products might seem like extra work, but if customer satisfaction and product quality are where Earth Tools rests its values, then it's the work that needs to be done.

Building something that lasts takes effort and time. Dufour knows what he stands for and what he wants to represent, and he makes that vision a reality. Dufour lives his values. He has built a company on his belief that if you take care of your customers, they will take care of you. Earth Tools doesn't advertise. They don't have a fancy facility. They operate on solar power, and they compost. It is a humble place because they are humble people. This is a lesson Dufour inherited from his father. He learned early on that the most critical element of his business would be providing quality and service.

Some around the region may not be familiar with Earth Tools because there's no sign and not much traffic out that way. Only a few people in the area require a walk-behind tractor. And that's OK. But Owen County is lucky to have Earth Tools and the business it brings to the area.