



Smooth operator

Last month we reported on the unveiling of Husqvarna's new-generation saws. Here, Simon Bowes gives us his thoughts on the 550 XP Mk II.

NEW-GENERATION 50 cc chainsaws from Husqvarna' - that was the headline. What were we expecting? I know I wasn't expecting a new 50 cc saw. We'd seen the new 60 cc machine that was launched to an enormous fanfare as the first five series machine, although hang on there a minute, it wasn't that at all. The first five-series machine was the 575 that came and went with hardly anyone taking any notice of it, despite it being the first Husqvarna to have the revolutionary new X-Torq engine. I remember being won over by the 575's torque but other than that it left me unimpressed and it was quickly replaced by the 576 which, while being undeniably better than its predecessor, still - in the words of the song - didn't impress me much. I bought one and almost had to give it away in the end. The guy I sold it to loved it; maybe it was just me that didn't get along with it. Now, there's the 572 and it's a completely different animal.

The 560 was the first of the new generation of Husqvarnas that left the familiar shape behind. They were an evolution first and a revolution second.

Now we get down to the nitty gritty. Why change the 550? Was it another 575?

Well, no, it wasn't. I bought a 550 to carry on the forwarder last year and the only thing I thought needed changing was the front handle. I commented on it in my review, although I attributed much of the problem to my oversize paws... I have big hands with almost square palms; it's a family trait and I always have to go right to the end of the rail to find gloves to fit. Even the fact that I'm missing the odd digit doesn't diminish the problem. It makes me popular when doing our first-aid refreshers.

Right away, the new saw feels different. It is less 'compact'; if it was a car I'd say it had more leg room.

The trainer I've used for many years knows me by now and I always get to play the guy who's had his hand in the sawbench. It's worth me keeping my hands out of sight up until the part when I play the victim with fake blood all over a gloved hand. It has garnered some wonderful reactions from people who suddenly realise I have actually got bits missing!

The 550 XP Mk II, as they are calling it, is a major revamp of what was a pretty good saw and, reading between the lines, I'd say it possibly has as much to do with the current and future lineup of saws in the Husqvarna range as it has to do with any shortcomings of the Mk I 550.

Yes, they have altered the front handle, moving it forward and lifting it away from the top cover so the saw is more user-friendly for those not blessed with dainty fingers, but they could have done that without changing the whole saw.

The Mk II has more power. It has better cooling. It has bigger tanks. It has everything a next-generation Husqvarna will have. It has been elevated into the same style as the 572. It has been pushed much closer to the 560... which is where we run into a bit of a dilemma.

Why buy a 560 when the 550 Mk II is very nearly a straight replacement? It's almost a direct comparison in the real world of woodcutting. Maybe not so when looking at specifications and technical data but there isn't much between the saws when fitted with the same bar and chain. Compare the 550 Mk II with a new 562 fitted with 3/8ths chain, though, and things start to make sense.

If you are to list the current pro saws in the Husqvarna range that professional harvesting contractors will use, it will be: 550 for small thinnings, 560 for general work and

572 for felling bigger timber, edge trees and oversize.

We've now got a 550 that will encroach onto the 560's territory, so it's just about feasible to forget the 560, unless you include the 562 in there that has clear blue water between it and the 550 at one end of the scale and the 572 at the other end.

I'd guess the 560 will be slowly phased out in the UK in the not-too-distant future. Oh, and by the way, the 550G with heated handles - for us chaps who enjoy warm hands while we work - will also be available. I personally don't buy saws without them unless I need a saw in a hurry and the dealers don't have a G model in stock.

So, that's the story surrounding the 550 Mk II and with that out of the way, the obvious question is: is it any good? How much better than the previous 550 is it?

It just so happens we are felling some fairly big grandis just now that provides an excellent site to pitch the old and new against each other. I'll need a new bar and chain for my own 550 as I run it with a 13-inch bar so it'll get a step up to a 15-inch combination for a few days whilst we tackle the stinky fir in the final compartment of the current thinning we're doing.

Right away, the new saw feels different. It is less 'compact'; if it was a car I'd say it had more leg room. I don't find my knuckles hitting the top cover like they do on the old saw and there is more distance between the front and back handles. It's a small difference but it does alter the feel of the saw, especially when delimiting. The slightly bigger tanks might make the fill times slightly further apart but as significant is the damping effect the extra ballast has on the saw's vibrations. I found the new 550 to be significantly smoother than the old 550, although I seem to be the only one that noticed it. The others thought both saws were pretty nice to use. There's not a huge difference in power either, although my old 550 has had a good number of hours of running whereas the new saw has only done a handful of fills so I'd expect it to loosen up a bit more given some time. It's just as light and just as handy - maybe more so and it feels more useable and that's where I have a problem with this new saw. I keep asking the same question; why have Husqvarna done this? Surely if you like the 550 but you need a bigger saw with more power you buy a 560. Having both saws I know there's enough difference to warrant having them both if the 550 is reserved for specific tasks. It is a bit lighter than the 560 so it's a bit better for brashing so long as you don't want to do outsiders all day every day.

I suppose the logic is that if you have a 550 you will need to replace it at some time and the 550 you buy will be a Mk II. It is that simple. Small saw users who like the 550 won't change their minds because the saw they find most suitable has been improved, and there's the answer.

In the world of development, improvement is the only way forward. If you stand still you are going backwards. The 550 is a very good saw and the new version is better. It doesn't make huge leaps forward and much of what's better isn't easy to see because it's under the covers.

Although I might seem to be a bit lukewarm over this new saw it's just because it isn't the new big saw I was expecting but, having used the new 550 I must admit that it answers the questions I had regarding the original incarnation.

So, would I buy one? If and when I need to replace my current 550 then yes, I would. Would I buy one instead of another 560? That I'm not so sure of. I might run a 550 as my small saw and just have a 70 cc saw for felling bigger trees. I just don't know. I have the luxury of running a couple of harvesters so things for me are different to when I cut everything by hand, and there's the rub. Harvesting has changed and the guys who fell all day everyday are become a bit of a rare breed. I know one thing for sure - twenty years ago I would have loved this saw, especially if the better cooling, better engine components, easier maintenance and the extra power make it a more durable piece of kit that lasts. I can remember testing the 550 when it was new and it seemed to be a little firecracker of a saw; a frantic, high revving thing like a hyperactive child who's been given one too many sweets. I thought it was altogether too much and cutters wouldn't like it - but I was wrong. The 550 has endured and it has its fans. Fans who I'm sure will like the new Mk II even more.