

## Mini-cranes worth more than their weight in heavy lifting

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EDMONTON - For handymen who want everything, Don Lucas has a potent new tool.

"Every individual has one or two situations where they know they can use this," Lucas said while demonstrating a two-tonne lift using the first mini-crane to reach Edmonton.

The compact package, imported from Japan, is a mechanical cross between Spiderman and Superman that does big jobs in places too small or awkward for conventional equipment.

The smallest mini-crane is only 80 centimetres wide, chest-high and little longer than a wheelbarrow. It rides freight elevators. It fits through doors. It trundles into confined spaces or corners.

When folded up for an operator to drive, by running the controls while walking behind, the 1.5-tonne, self-propelled tracked vehicle on rubber treads is handy.

With spider-like legs unfolded and boom extended, the compact machine hoists up to 2.5 tonnes as high as about eight metres.

Most uses of mini-cranes are industrial so far, such as moving big electric motors and pipe racks inside power plants or factories.

But the new machines are catching on in the do-it-yourself crowd.

"They are so cute," said Lucas, who with brother Jim built Encore Trucking & Transport Ltd. into a specialist in heavy lifting and shipping with equipment that dwarfs their new sideline.

Early adopters of mini-cranes as consumer technology are using them for placing big rocks in ambitious backyard landscaping projects and hoisting roof trusses to build garages, Don Lucas said.

The compact models are built to specialize in work below the astronomical weight-lifting capacities of full-sized industrial cranes that require certified equipment operators, he said.

"They're so handy, versatile and tough that there's an incredible amount of work for them. You'll never predict all the ways you'll be able to use them," Lucas said.

Sticker prices on even the smallest mini-cranes run into the six-digit range. But Encore is starting a new service line of renting out the machines for about \$250 to \$300 a day plus delivery fees.

"The trucks are that much an hour," said Lucas.

His firm runs monster "pickers" or combination crane and semi-trailer units for big jobs such as delivering and placing gas-processing plant machinery and 40-metre-long signs for Edmonton's new Anthony Henday freeway that weigh about 17 tonnes.

Mini-cranes fit into a heavy-lifting niche of loads below about 2.5 tonnes. "There's a lot of work under 4,000 to 5,000 pounds," said Lucas, who shows his 30-plus years in the field by still speaking in Imperial measurements.

"They're pretty simple to run," he added.

The design includes built-in safety features such as sensors that stop the action if inexperienced operators move loads in ways that threaten to tip the crane, Lucas said.

The company's dispatchers and accountants taught themselves to run the latest additions to Encore's fleet before there was time to put on new decals with English translations of Japanese names and directions for the controls, he said.

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