

Skid Steer Loader Buyer's Guide

By the purchasing experts at BuyerZone

Skid steer loaders are one of the most versatile pieces of construction equipment you can buy. Their compact size, maneuverability, and ability to easily switch among a huge range of different attachments makes them valuable in landscaping, manufacturing, general construction, recycling, and many other industries.

To start, here's a quick look at how much you can expect to pay for a new skid steer loader.

Capacity	Estimated cost
975 lbs	\$12,000 to \$15,000
1350 lbs	\$17,000 to \$20,000
1600 lbs (most common)	\$18,000 to \$22,000
2000 lbs	\$22,000 to \$28,000
2200 lbs (heavy lift)	\$30,000+



This **BuyerZone Skid Steer Loaders Buyer's Guide** will give you everything you need to know to start shopping for a skid steer loader, including attachments, how to choose a dealer, and how to prepare for a purchase.

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Skid steer purchasing basics

Skid steer loaders are built on four wheels set very closely together. The engine is usually in the rear, just behind the operator's seat in the cab. Two arms run on either side of the cab from back to front and connect to the attachment that actually does the work: a bucket for scooping, forks for moving pallets, or any of dozens of other tools.

The term "skid steer" refers to how the vehicle gets around. Instead of turning like a car, by angling the front wheels to change direction, skid steer loaders turn by driving the wheels on one side of the machine while stopping the wheels on the other. The loader "skids" on the stopped wheels and pivots around them – skid steers can completely turn around within their own length.

Many people use the brand name "Bobcat" to refer to the entire class of machines. While most dealers will know what you mean, it's best to use the generic terms "skid steer loader" or "skid steer" when talking about these machines in general. The Bobcat Company will appreciate it, too. There are eight or 10 significant manufacturers of skid steers, so don't get pigeonholed into one just by using the wrong term.

- Consider the **physical size** of the loader, **how high** you need to dump, and **how much** you need to lift.
- Choose the right **tires** – or tracks – for your application.
- Compare comfort, visibility, and maintenance needs.

There are three central questions about size you'll need to ask in your search for a skid steer loader.

The first major consideration is the **physical size** of the machine: carefully measure any gates, garages, or in other small spaces your skid steer needs to fit through. Typical skid steers range in width from about 3' to over 6', while heights are usually between 5' and 7'. Knowing your height and width limitations is a very simple way to narrow your choices.

A second point to address is how high you need the loader to lift: if you need it to fill a 9' high dump truck, make sure the model you choose has the appropriate **dumping height**. This is usually measured as the "height to hinge pin," meaning the pivot point between the arms of the loader and the bucket. It can range from around 8' on smaller models to over 10' on the largest.

Most skid steer purchases are driven by these two factors – physical size and dumping height – because they're often inflexible. The third main consideration is **lifting capacity**, also known as operating capacity. It's also very important, but you'll usually have more flexibility here. As lifting capacity increases, the physical size will increase as well. If your primary consideration is access to tight places, you may have to settle for slightly less carrying capacity.

According to Compact Equipment magazine, the most popular size is the 1,750 lb to 2,200 lb range. Generally, anything over 2,200 lbs is considered a heavy-lift skid steer. In recent years, several manufacturers have introduced skid steers that can handle over 3,000 lbs, but businesses that require that much capacity often turn to full-size front end loaders or other heavy equipment instead.

Tires

The main choices for skid steer tires are pneumatic – hollow rubber tires filled with either air or polyurethane foam – or solid rubber tires.

- **Air-filled tires** are the best at smoothing the ride on bumpy or uneven surfaces, but you run the risk of getting a flat. They're also the least expensive.
- **Foam-filled pneumatic tires** are impervious to flats, but are more expensive: they can cost \$400 each. In addition, since foam-filled tires are so much heavier than air-filled, they put additional strain on the skid steer's transmission and can lead to breakdowns.
- **Solid rubber tires** are typically much thinner, so they don't have the weight problems, and also never go flat. However, they do give the roughest ride.

If you plan to use your skid steer primarily on paved roads or smooth surfaces, or if your operating environment has lots of puncture hazards (such as a recycling center with lots of broken glass), solid rubber tires can be a good choice for longevity. In most general-purpose use, though, air-filled tires are the most economical and comfortable choice.

Skid steer alternative

A near relative of the skid steer loader is the **compact track loader**. Also known as a multi-terrain loader or rubber track loader, it's basically a skid steer body mounted on dual treads -- like a tank or bulldozer -- instead of wheels. The main advantage of a compact track loader is that treads get better traction than wheels in mud or loose terrain. Also, because the weight of the loader is distributed across a much larger surface, track loaders often do less damage to the ground they're used on than wheeled loaders.

Overall, track loaders tend to be bigger, with more capacity and correspondingly higher prices, so they're generally purchased either as part of a fleet of construction vehicles that also includes skid steers, or for applications where they'll be used on loose terrain most of the time. If you only need tracks occasionally, it's possible to buy conversion kits that let you attach treads to a standard skid steer – they fit right over the wheels.

Evaluating multiple models

Once you've narrowed down your choice to some models that are the right size for your needs, try them out. Evaluate these aspects of each one:

- **Comfort.** A skid steer loader operator may be in the cab for hours at a stretch. Is the seat comfortable? Are controls easy to reach? Is it easy to get in and out?
- **Visibility.** Good vision can speed work and reduce accidents. Can you see the edges of the bucket from the seat? Can you see reasonably well to the sides?
- **Maintenance.** While tough, skid steers do require constant maintenance. How easy is it to access the engine and hydraulic pumps? What is the recommended service schedule like?

Operating capacity for a skid steer is set at 50% of the tipping load – the point at which the rear wheels lift off the ground. The industry classifies skid steers into nine categories:

Skid Steer Loader capacity ratings

Less than 700 lbs.

700 - 975 lbs.

976 - 1,250 lbs.

1,251 - 1,350 lbs.

1,350 - 1,600 lbs.

1,601 - 1,750 lbs.

1,751 - 2,200 lbs.

2,201 - 2,700 lbs.

2,701+ lbs.

Skid steer loader attachments

- Attachments let a loader fill multiple roles
- Choose from a huge variety of tools for lifting, cutting, cleaning, and more
- Many attachments are interchangeable, some require high-flow hydraulics or special connectors

One feature that makes a skid steer loader such a popular piece of equipment is their ability to use a wide range of different attachments to handle all kinds of jobs. The standard attachment is a bucket – a basic scoop for picking up and hauling loose soil, gravel, mulch, etc.

Here are some other attachments you might want:

- **Pallet forks** – your skid steer loader can also function as a forklift
- **Multi-purpose or 4 in 1 bucket** – a “jaw” bucket that opens and closes.
- **Grapple bucket** – has “arms” that can clamp down over the load.
- **Hydraulic hammers** – for breaking rock or concrete
- **Brooms** – powered, to clean up the job site
- **Augers** – quickly drill clean holes
- **Grapplers** – good at picking up larger loose materials (brush or recycling)
- **Cold planers** – for scraping and leveling pavement
- **Angle blades** – basically a bulldozer blade, for pushing and leveling
- **Lifting booms** – for picking up and moving heavy objects
- **Trenchers** – dig trenches of various depths and widths
- **Backhoes** – a small version of the common digging arm
- **Snow blowers and pushers** – very popular for removing snow in parking lots and other tight spaces
- **Stump grinders** – turn tough tree stumps into dust
- **Mowers** – available in multiple sizes and types
- **Rototillers** – the easy way to turn over soil for planting

The varieties of attachments go on and on – some companies list over 50 different types. Fortunately, you don't have to make all your attachment decisions at once. It's very common for skid steer loader buyers to purchase the machine with one or two critical attachments, then return to buy additional attachments later. You can also rent attachments, which is helpful when you need a specific tool only occasionally.

Attachments are almost all interchangeable among the different brands and models of skid steers, thanks to a universal skid steer loader attachment bracket called the "quick attach." Even some compact tractors and compact wheel loaders use the same system, giving you the ability to share attachments among multiple machines.

A very small number of attachments are not interchangeable, though. For example, a backhoe can generate so much torque that it could rip itself right off the quick attach without additional support. To avoid this, it gets attached directly to the frame of the loader, in addition to the quick attach. In these cases, the attachments won't work with brands other than the one they were designed for.

Most powered attachments connect to the skid steer's hydraulics. However, a few high-powered attachments, such as cold planers and stump grinders, require a high-flow hydraulic system. Not every skid steer loader has a high-flow hydraulic system, so be sure to ask about the power requirements of the attachments you plan to use before you decide on a purchase.

Other skid steer features

- **Radial lift** provides more stability with full loads, **vertical lift** provides more reach
- **Cab enclosures** allow use of the loader in all kinds of weather
- Different **control options** are suited to different operators.

Manufacturers have added all kinds of skid steer features to their models in recent years. What used to be a very bare-bones piece of equipment now has many options that can make it safer, more comfortable, and more efficient to operate.

One good example is the **anti-stall device**. Skid steer loaders use the same hydraulic power system for driving and for manipulating attachments. If the operator tries to do too much – lifting a heavy load while accelerating, for example – the engine will be unable to supply enough power, resulting in a stall. Avoiding stalls used to take skill and practice – but now, some brands have anti-stall devices built in that automatically prevent them.

Vertical or radial lifting

The standard skid steer features a **radial lift** design. The arms are attached to the machine at a single point on each side, so as the arms are raised, the bucket moves in an arc: away from the machine as it moves from the ground to the height of the mounting pin, then back towards the machine as it goes higher. This design makes the loader more stable with a full load at high or low elevations.

The drawback to radial lift is that the reach of the machine is diminished. An alternative, called **vertical lift**, uses a hinged joint to move the bucket out as it rises, allowing the load to move almost straight up and down. Vertical lift gives the skid steer more reach at high lifts, which is useful when loading dump trucks, for example. It's also important if you're going to be using your skid steer extensively as a forklift.

Cab enclosures

Until recently, most skid steers were only available in an open configuration where there was only a canopy overhead -- no doors or windows -- which exposed the operator to the elements. Now, many models are available with an enclosed, heated cab that is a welcome feature in cold climates. Because skid steers constantly kick up clouds of dust, visibility can be a problem in an enclosed cab, so many operators remove the windows during the summer. In fact, skid steer operators can take the cab on and off at will.

Skid steer features that go along with enclosed cab are air conditioning and defrosters. Air conditioning is very rare, but defrosters to help visibility are more common and are usually a good idea in an enclosed cab.

Control options

There are two standard control setups for operating a skid steer loader. The traditional setup uses two hand levers, one for speed and direction on the right side and another for the left. Foot pedals control the curl and lift of the bucket. A newer type of control uses two 360° joysticks. One controls the speed and direction of the loader, while the other operates the bucket. There are other control variations as well, such as a twin lever setup that incorporates a pivot on each lever to control the attachment.

The main reason to choose one style of control over another is personal preference. Operators who are familiar with one system will naturally want to stick with it. The two-handed joystick approach is considered somewhat easier to learn, since it only uses two appendages at once, instead of two hands and two feet. However, some people in the industry feel that hand and foot setups are more efficient.

Other skid steer features

Each manufacturer offers a different selection of other add-ons that might be right for your situation:

- **Warning flashers** or **rotating beacons** are an important safety feature for road work.
- **Lighting**, both front and rear, makes night work much easier.
- **Overhead displays** can provide information on fuel and oil levels, hours worked, and more.
- **Suspension seats** help make a rough ride more tolerable.
- **Push-button quick attach** lets you switch attachments without getting out of the cab.
- **Rear view mirrors** are a big help in crowded operating environments.
- **Two-speed transmissions** give you more control over the loader's speed.

Choosing skid steer dealers

- Service policies and expertise are essential
- Find a dealer with years of skid steer sales under their belt
- Trust your personal reactions

Buying a skid steer loader involves more than just choosing the right model and the right accessories: you have to choose from several skid steer dealers to find one you can work with for the long term. Like any piece of construction equipment that works in the dirt and rocks, your skid steer will wear and eventually break, making your relationship with the dealer important for preventative maintenance and repairs.

Ask potential skid steer dealers about their service policies. Find out how they'll handle breakdowns: do they come to you for quick repairs? If your loader needs to go into the shop for more extensive work, will they pick it up and return it, or do you need to transport it yourself?

Because of the service needs, you'll want to choose a dealer that is reasonably close to you. Don't feel like you have to choose the absolute closest dealer, but try to find one no further than 100 or 150 miles, keeping a round trip to around half a day.

Many construction equipment dealers have worked in the industry for decades. Finding someone who's been in business for that long is a good indication that they'll be in business for years to come and able to support your purchase. However, not all construction equipment dealers are very familiar with skid steers. In some cases, the dealer may do more business in full size wheel loaders, backhoes, and bulldozers, while skid steers represent only a small portion of their sales. Dealers who sell higher volumes of skid steers will probably be able to do a better job of helping you make the right choice.

Dealers who do considerable skid steer business are also likely to have a wider variety of attachments in stock, and be willing to rent them to you. You may only need a hydraulic hammer once or twice a year, so paying \$10,000 to buy one is a waste. Skid steer dealers with a good selection of rental attachments add considerable value to your purchase.

Don't underestimate personal reactions, as well. Choose a dealer you feel is honest with you and who is easy to work with: those impressions are often accurate. Saving a thousand dollars on your initial purchase is insignificant compared to the ongoing costs you'll incur over the years. Instead of focusing on that initial price, concentrate on establishing a relationship with a dealer who is trustworthy and easy to work with.

Skid steer loader pricing

- Most common: 1,600 lb capacity skid steer loaders for \$18,000 to \$22,000
- Basic attachments start at \$700, powered attachments are \$3,000 or more
- Buying used is a good way to save if you won't be using the loader full-time

Pricing for skid steers is fairly consistent across brands and vendors, and is mainly determined by the operating capacity. The overall range, from the smallest 650 lb machines to the 3,000 lb monsters, is around \$12,000 to \$50,000, but we can break it down in a little more detail:

- <1350 lb. capacity → \$17,000 to \$20,000
- 1600 lb. capacity → \$18,000 to \$22,000
- 2000 lb. capacity → \$22,000 to \$28,000

Heavy-lift skid steers – up over 2,200 lb capacities – get considerably more expensive, usually over \$30,000 and up to \$50,000.

As with most types of heavy machinery, there is a definite correlation between cost and quality in skid steers: proven, reliable brands tend to cost a little extra. Most dealers carry multiple brands, so it's worth comparing, but paying a little extra for more reliability is often worthwhile.

In many cases, renting for a month is the best way to evaluate a skid steer loader before you buy it. As a point of reference, monthly rental costs for a 1,600 lb capacity skid steer are around \$1,000 to \$1,300. Some dealers will even let you deduct some or all of the rental cost from the purchase price.

Skid steer attachment pricing

In addition to the skid steer, you'll need at least one attachment to do the actual work. Attachments vary widely in price. A basic bucket usually only costs \$700 to \$1,000, while other low-end attachments – pallet forks, augers, and 4 in 1 buckets – are typically under \$3,000. Trenchers, rotary mowers, power rakes, and sweepers usually fall into a \$3,000 to \$8,000 range.

Complex powered attachments such as hydraulic hammers, flail mowers, backhoes, and cold planers can cost almost as much as the skid steers they connect to. Expect to pay \$10,000 to \$20,000, depending on their size. A small percentage of these high-end attachments require high-flow hydraulics, which add another \$1,500 or \$2,000 to the price.

Adding a cab enclosure and heating is usually around \$1,500 to \$2,000. Adding rubber tracks can cost \$4,000 to \$6,000.

Warranties

You can expect at least a one-year parts and labor warranty on new skid steers. As with cars, you may get longer warranties on some subsystems: two or three years on the powertrain, for example. Often you'll be able to extend the warranty at additional cost. If you have equipment maintenance facilities and personnel already, skip it – otherwise it's worth considering.

New v. used

Most skid steer dealers sell both new and used equipment. While you can save quite a bit of money buying used, it's not worth the risk if you're going to be using the machine full time. This goes back to

the use of the machine: it's always in the thick of things, working hard, and will be subjected to significant wear.

If you'll only be using it part-time, you can find some great deals. A mid-sized skid steer that sells for \$20,000 new will probably sell for around \$14,000 used. A good benchmark to look for is a machine that has 1,000 to 2,000 hours of use – that's enough to drop the price while still getting you a machine with a long lifespan ahead of it.

Skid steer buying tips

- **Get in it.** Many dealers have a “tow and show” trailer they use to bring a demo model for you to try out. This gives you a good sense of the machine's characteristics and lets you see if it fits your operation.
- **Keep up the maintenance.** Skid steers require some attention to detail: prompt hydraulic fluid and oil changes are a must. If your skid steer gets constant use, it can even be worthwhile to exceed the maintenance schedule.
- **Know the extras you want.** In an industrial setting, where the loader will be shuttling back and forth constantly, you'll want to be more picky about the controls. Landscapers often prefer a little extra reach on their machines, and in general construction, extra power is always a plus.
- **Choose attachments wisely.** Most skid steer owners spend the bulk of their time using one or two attachments. Don't go overboard and buy everything you might need someday – remember that you can rent attachments for a day or week as needed. If you find yourself renting the same attachment repeatedly, you can always purchase it later.

Whatever you need to buy for your business, BuyerZone can help. Read free pricing information and buying advice, then get matched to qualified dealers of over 150 different products and services. [Visit BuyerZone now](https://www.buyerzone.com) and save money on your next purchase.