

## Homeowners make noise about leaf blowers More communities consider bans and new regulations

- Adrian Higgins, Washington Post  
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The autumn leaves, looking particularly good this year, have begun their dazzling avalanche. Honey, pass me the Bose Noise Cancelling Headphones.

The whining roar of the leaf blower begins in earnest, filling the November air with a seasonal symphony: the growl of the gasoline engine, the siren call of its inner fan and the steady hiss of air blasting 200 miles per hour. Electric versions, a little quieter, replace the gas engine's howls with a high-pitched scream that seems to gnaw at something deep in the brain.

This layer of sounds, a cacophony unknown to man or beast until a generation ago, now seems to define the landscape's passage to winter. Manufacturers of leaf blowers shipped a record 2.74 million gas-powered units this year alone. In addition, more than 3 million electric blowers are sold annually in North America. That's a whole lot of wind for sale.

When you think about it, the leaf blower forms an uncanny reflection of the fault lines in modern American society: It's a machine reviled by leftward-thinking intellectuals and beloved by red-blooded horsepower junkies. It is an essential workmate of the laboring immigrant classes.

Montgomery County, Md., bans the sale and use of leaf blowers generating more than 70 decibels, but most Washington area jurisdictions seek to regulate them through general noise ordinances that restrict hours of use. Elsewhere, however, they are banned outright.

Blower bashing reached a peak in the late 1990s when Peter Graves, Meredith Baxter and other Hollywood stars lobbied politicians to prohibit the machine. More than 20 cities in California joined Los Angeles in banning them, the latest the generally serious-minded and well-heeled citizens of Palo Alto.

Since the City Council enacted the ban in June 2005, most of the complaints have been against landscape maintenance crews. Stacey Henderson is the Palo Alto Police Department's officer assigned to enforce the ban, which affects residential areas. In the city's sylvan neighborhoods, she issues two warnings to each offender and then a citation. "I've had one gardener who's been cited seven times, and it's \$100 a ticket," she said. "He just won't stop."

Henderson has sent out more than 5,000 warning letters to residents and their landscapers who have been subject to complaint. The result has been a quieter city, she said, though in the rainy season, landscapers like to switch back to gas blowers to avoid getting electric shocks.

In Santa Barbara, where a similar ban on gas blowers went into effect eight years ago, "it's a lot better, but it's not perfect because there are still the electric ones," said Ashleigh Brilliant, who led the ballot initiative to enact the ban. "There are still people who defy the law, but the streets are much quieter, and I think there's less dust in the air."

Brilliant by trade is an epigrammatist: He coins witticisms. He is particularly fond of one: "There are worse things than noise, but I can't think of any because of all the noise." Some others: "Make peace, not noise." And "Honk if you like peace and quiet."

Like an increasing number of people in the 21st century cyberworld, Brilliant works from home, and it's the residential neighborhoods that can get aurally assaulted for hours on end.

"More people are working from home," said Brilliant, "and there just isn't an awareness of how badly detrimental noise can be as a factor in one's life."

Cambridge, Mass., is considering a ban or other restrictions on gas blowers, said Richard Rossi, the deputy city manager. "We are going to be looking at various ordinances that exist around the country, talk to cities and see how effective they are," he said.

Cambridge has more than 100,000 residents crowded into an area of little more than 6 square miles, with more people if you count the daily influx of students, workers and tourists. "A lot of people in this community work from home," said Rossi. A landscape crew may spend only 10 minutes at one property, but if they visit half a dozen on a street, said Rossi, "you multiply that time by 5 or 6. People feel that's a disturbance."

Opponents of leaf blowers say noise isn't the only pollutant. The fumes from the gas engines foul the air and the machines kick up particulates containing mold, pesticides, dried animal waste and plain old dust. John Murtagh, a City Council member in Yonkers, N.Y., is pushing his colleagues to ban leaf blowers during the summer, as other communities in Westchester County have done. Murtagh said 13 percent of the city's children suffer from asthma. He said that other than in the fall, the machines' "utility is dramatically outweighed by the pollution they generate."

Les Blomberg, founder of Noise Pollution Clearinghouse, an environmental resources nonprofit group in Montpelier, Vt., said the machine is an absurdly inefficient contraption as a replacement for leaf rake and patio broom. "You would never take one of these things into your house and dust with it," he said. "Because it's outside, some of that dust is going to settle in somebody else's yard."

Landscapers and manufacturers argue that leaf blowers dramatically reduce the time spent gathering leaves and cleaning littered surfaces. And the industry has invested heavily in making the machines cleaner and quieter, said Bill Harley, president of the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute, a trade group.

"The equipment is 75 percent cleaner than it was in the early '90s, and we've made great strides in sound levels," he said.

Larry Will, a retired vice president of engineering for Echo, a major manufacturer, said engineers have now reduced the sound levels of the quietest gasoline models to the level of electric machines and eliminated "the scream." Advances include redesigning the wind-making impellers to reduce the whine, encasing engines in soundproofed covers and enlarging mufflers.

In Echo's current lineup, three handheld models and two backpack versions meet the gold standard of relatively quiet blowers: 65 decibels, measured at 50 feet. Its five other backpack types -- more powerful and aimed at the commercial market -- range in noise from 71 to 74 decibels.

The sound level at the machines is considerably higher.

If the machines are still meeting resistance in communities across the country, they aren't with homeowners and landscapers who see them as a way to clean up properties rapidly.

Harley's organization reported shipments this year of 2.16 million handheld gasoline blowers, an increase of more than 10 percent over last year. A total of 579,390 backpack blowers were shipped to market, a 24 percent climb over 2004.

Both types "have had a significant growth in the last few years," said Joe Fahey, vice president of marketing for Echo. He said the boom in the housing market and the greater need or desire of homeowners to have contractors do their yard work have fueled the demand. And some do-it-yourselfers have turned to handheld gas models while others are gravitating to the more comfortable backpack versions.

Fahey said that for all the attention given to local blower bans, noise levels aren't the first attribute buyers are looking for. "Certainly, sales of low-noise models are increasing, but the lion's share of the business is for standard units," he said.

Also, many people have managed to tune out the sound or find that it melts into the general cacophony of modern life. Amy Rothstein, a piano teacher in McLean, Va., said the noise of neighbors' remodeling projects and the construction of two infill houses is more of a bother. "There's machinery going all the time," she said. "The blowers are just a small part of it."

"Personally," said Brilliant in Santa Barbara, "I'm very conscious of noises, and to me this was always a desecration of our community, which is otherwise famous for its beauty and charm."

"I find jackhammers to be really annoying," Fahey said. "But you know what? They serve a purpose."

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### Softening the sound

**Noise:** Gasoline models have been made cleaner and quieter since the 1990s. Look for low-noise blowers and follow local noise ordinances, which generally limit the hours of lawn and garden equipment use. Some electric models can be noisier than gas ones. Look for electric models with variable speed controls to reduce the noise. Use the lowest possible throttle speed to do the job and nozzle attachments that lower sound levels.

**Safety:** Keep the blower at least 50 feet from people and pets, and don't blow in their direction. Stop blowing if approached.

Pollution: Read the operator's manual, maintain blowers and follow correct fueling procedures. Don't use a blower to clean up excessively dusty areas. Start with the nozzle at ground level, then raise it to a point where it moves leaves without generating dust.

See the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute's guide to safe and courteous use at [www.opei.org](http://www.opei.org).

Sources: OPEI, leaf blower manufacturers, government advisories

Noise comparisons

Some leaf blower manufacturers are modifying the design of their products to reduce the blowers' volume. Echo's gas-powered PB-260L model leaf blower emits noise up to 65 decibels (measured at 50 feet). It is Echo's quietest model; others reach 74 decibels. Decibel levels for comparison:

Painful: Jackhammer, 130 decibels

Extremely loud: Snowmobile, 100 decibels

Very loud: Vacuum cleaner, 70 decibels

Moderate: Refrigerator, 50 decibels

Faint: Rice Krispies, 30 decibels

Note: Sounds louder than 80 decibels are considered potentially hazardous.

Sources: American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, Echo Outdoor Power Equipment

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