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WHITE NOISE

Leaf blower use is still a hot-button issue in areas across the U.S. But with improved machine performance and responsible operation, noise complaints may be put to rest.

To landscape professionals, the hum of a leaf blower starting up in the morning is the sound of productivity and profitability. But to many property owners, it's a roar, a nuisance, and a harbinger of noise and air pollution that should be avoided at all costs. More than 30 years after the first leaf blower made its way to the U.S., the battle still rages over what many landscape professionals consider one of the most effective tools in their arsenals.

Whether they're used at residences or on the grounds of commercial properties for gathering leaves in the fall or for cleanup year-round, blowers often raise the hackles of people living or working nearby, more so than other types of outdoor equipment.

"Some people tell you it's dust and air pollution, other people say it's noise pollution. Everybody has their own pet peeves," says Daniel Hanson, president of SCLM Co., a commercial and residential landscape maintenance firm in Laverne, Calif.

Blower ban advocates argue that gas-powered leaf blowers emit pollutants and spread particulate matter, which has been shown to aggravate asthma and cause respiratory problems. Yet one of the biggest grievances people raise involves blower noise.

"Blowers operate in a frequency range that's irritating to humans," explains Kris Kiser, executive vice president, Outdoor Power Equipment Institute (OPEI).

"Old blowers have a high-pitched whine not common on other products," adds Larry Will, retired vice president and consultant for outdoor power

equipment manufacturer Echo, Lake Zurich, Ill. That's why people go after blowers more than other outdoor equipment.

AN ON-GOING ISSUE. Typically, the brouhaha over blower use begins when a municipality or city receives a complaint from a resident. "Usually the complaints are loud and repetitious," Kiser says. "Often the same person, an anti-leaf-blower advocate, leads the charge."

From there, Will says it's an emotional issue that spreads from community to community. Complaints often originate in affluent communities, although areas with parents who worry about their children's health or older residents who are sensitive to noise may also advocate for restrictions. "There are some communities that are very concerned about things such as noise and are in a position to take issue with it," Will explains. "They are usually influential. Other communities, such as working communities with other sources of noise like factories, don't usually see movement with blower legislation."

Blower restrictions are found across the country, from Chapel Hill, N.C., and Portland, Ore., to Phoenix and portions of southern Florida. California in particular has long been a blower legislation hotspot, as Barbara Alvarez, president of Alvarez Landscape & Maintenance and past president of California Landscape Contractors Association (CLCA), can attest. She spent much of her time from 1999 to 2001 working on legislation to prevent statewide bans on blower use in California. During that same time, many individual cities passed bans or restrictions.

Despite work by the CLCA, a number of cities in California have passed complete bans on gasoline-powered blowers. And in Laguna Beach, all blowers – including electric models – are banned, which is particularly challenging for landscape professionals who are forced to rely on rakes or yard vacuums, says Robert Wade, owner of Wade Landscape in Laguna Beach and director of legislation for the CLCA. Rather than enacting bans, however, most California cities simply restrict the hours when blowers can be used and specify the decibel level at which blowers may operate. If it's a choice between bans or restrictions, many landscape contractors would gladly deal with the latter.

Alvarez believes the animosity toward blowers from the late 1990s and early 2000s is dying down in California. In fact, she says the city of South Pasadena recently overturned a ban on leaf blowers because newer models are quieter and produce fewer emissions. "Progress is happening as technology gets better," she explains.

Yet as the debate over blower use cools in California, it's heating up in areas including Hawaii and the Northeast. According to Will, cities and counties including Eastchester, N.Y.; Montclair, N.J.; and Brookline, Mass., are in the midst of blower debates.

"The most recent debate was in Yonkers, N.Y., and cities surrounding New York City," Kiser explains. "There's a woman up there who has taken this as

her cause." As a result, cities in Westchester County, including Yonkers, Rye and Scarsdale, recently banned blowers during certain months of the year because of noise and environmental concerns.

It's a situation that's directly affecting Nicholas Esposito, owner of Truly Green Landscaping & Design, which provides landscape services to the New York metropolitan area and nearby cities including Scarsdale, which has banned blower use from June through August. "In those months, that's when we really use them," Esposito says. "It's a shame, but what can we do? Our association [the New York State Turf & Landscape Association] just keeps trying to fight it, but we've really had no luck."

MORE IN A DAY'S WORK. Opponents of blower use argue that manual tools, such as rakes, tackle cleanup jobs just as well. Perhaps that's true for homeowners spending an afternoon cleaning up the backyard, but when it comes to professionals working with blowers day in and day out, it's a different story. According to the California Landscape Contractors Association, work typically done with a blower takes five times longer when handled by hand. And according to the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET), landscape costs increase from 20 to 40 percent if operators do the same work without a leaf blower. That can be a hardship for many companies.

Still, professionals such as Esposito refuse to pass the increased cost of raking on to customers. "At this time in the economy with the way things are, how could I go ahead and charge anybody any higher prices? It would be ridiculous," he says. "We try to work around it and not make a mess."

It's not just landscape contractors and their employees who suffer from blower regulations either. Whether crews are responsible for maintaining private residences or commercial settings, blower use results in considerably tidier work. "As an owner, walking around after the property is done, I see there's a lot we could really do better if we used a blower," Esposito says.

He admits there are times when blower use is necessary, even during the summer when such equipment is banned. To make blower use discreet in those situations, Esposito purchased a couple of handheld units that are smaller and quieter than larger backpack models. "We know it's not the right thing to do, but we just hit some areas where we need them. We limit ourselves and we try to keep them really low," Esposito says.

Truly Green Landscaping & Design and other companies that occasionally sneak in blower use run the risk of tickets and fines if they are caught. "Some police officers are pretty cool about it and say, 'Hey, listen, you have to turn it down,' and they'll give us a break once in a while," Esposito says. "But if they see us again, they'll give us a hard time and a ticket. I'm always telling my guys to be careful because this is the blower war."

Although enforcement is a real threat in some parts of New York, even in Yonkers the mayor has said that police have better things to do than enforce the blower ban. The same is true in many California cities. Alvarez

says police in Los Angeles only react to specific complaints because the city has more critical issues with which to deal. Other California cities, including ones in which Hanson's company does business, have lifted bans altogether for that reason.

BRINGING THE DECIBELS DOWN. Reducing the irritation blowers cause is easier thanks to manufacturers' concerted effort to produce quieter machines. Prior to 1990, many leaf blowers were as loud as 78 decibels. Most blowers that have been introduced in the past two to three years are between 65 and 70 decibels. "A lot of manufacturers have said, 'We need to do whatever we can.' They are doing their best," Kiser says.

"Sound reduction is now an important design goal in the development process," Will adds. "For every 6-decibel reduction in sound level, sound pressure is reduced by 50 percent."

In addition to working to produce quieter blowers, manufacturers including Echo, Shindaiwa, Husqvarna and Stihl also strive to meet or exceed stringent Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and California Air Resources Board emissions guidelines. Yet despite improvements, protests persist.

"The problem now is the blowers' reputation, more so than reality," Will says. "Blowers in the past were noisy. New designs, however, are universally quieter – some by as much as 75 percent. Unfortunately, some older blowers remain in service and continue to irritate people." That's why Will believes legislation should focus on phasing out older blower designs rather than banning the equipment altogether.

One reason older blowers are kept in commission longer is newer, quieter units may cost more. That's where blower buyback programs, which make it easier for professionals to upgrade, come in. One such program in the South Coast Air Quality Management District of Southern California allows landscapers to exchange older gas-powered leaf blowers for new models for only \$200 per blower. The improved fuel efficiency of these models is a selling point manufacturers push, too, because it can save contractors money in the long run.

Increased prices and regulations or not, Kiser says blower purchases have jumped in recent years. In fact, market research firm Mintel International reports handheld and backpack blower shipments increased from 2.3 million in 2002 to 2.8 million in 2007. In other words, despite additional regulation, blowers are still in demand.

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY. Without responsible operation, it doesn't matter whether the blower being used is a quieter model or not. "Part of the problem is you get people out there using a blower who don't know how," Hanson says. "Running the throttle up and down constantly can be an annoying thing, and if you're just blowing dirt and debris everywhere, that's a complaint." Early morning or late evening use and the number of blowers that are operated at once are two other common irritants that lead to objections from residents.

That's why OPEI works to educate blower operators on ways to limit noise. (For ideas, see "Down with Noise" on page 72.) "What we have found is when they put in behavior modifications, the problem goes away," Kiser says.

Contractors are willing to do what they can to reduce complaints, particularly if it means keeping blowers in employees' hands. That's why many companies have implemented blower education programs. Hanson's company requires new hires to watch training videos so they are familiar with proper blower use. Then it's up to each crew foreman to make sure everybody understands correct equipment use.

In addition to advocating training, Will recommends every contractor carry one quiet leaf blower for use in areas where noise should be kept to a minimum. That's what Hanson's teams do.

"It may not matter if you're cleaning a parking lot, but it may be very important next to a hospital," Will says. "Do something before it becomes an issue."

Beyond encouraging responsible use, landscape professionals' best bet for fending off blower legislation is to be proactive. Will says contractors should make their views on the issue and their reasons for using blowers known. "When you hear talk of blower bans, go to city hall and ask to be in the discussion," Wade suggests. "Show up at meetings and city council events. Volunteer to give demonstrations of effective, quiet use."

"Have the manufacturers help," adds Alvarez, who says Echo and Stihl were particularly helpful when she was battling the push for stricter regulations in California. Most of all, she stresses, "Embrace the other side so you can come to a point where both sides win. Compromising is key."