

Do noisy leaf blowers drive you crazy? You're not alone.

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In South Florida, where leaf-drop season is in full force, Palm Beach recently passed a ban on gas-powered blowers on properties of less than one acre despite opposition from landscaping company owners, who said their livelihood would be adversely affected because they would have to buy new \$300-\$500 machines, add hours and raise rates, thus risking a loss in customers. Key West is drafting a proposal. South Miami commissioners voted down a plan to regulate the “annoying” racket but are considering a tougher noise ordinance. Former Coral Gables commissioner Ralph Cabrera introduced a ban several years ago, but irate citizens complained about government infringement on their private domains and the possible increase in lawn service fees and the proposal was tabled.

Activists have collected petitions, written blogs on “What the Devil Does in His Spare Time” and created websites such as quietcommunities.org, silencity.com, thequietcoalition.com and noisefree.org dedicated to banishing leaf blowers from the planet. A Facebook page documents neighbors’ spats: “F*** your idiotic and wasteful lawn!” and “We are tormented daily by leaf blower OCD” and “What’s next? Banning lawn mowers in favor of scythes?”

“People get emotionally worked up and make it a cause, like saving the whale,” said Larry Will, the engineer who invented the first quiet leaf blower for Echo. Today, he is retired but still on a mission to educate people on proper, judicious leaf blower use and encourage transition to new low-noise, low-emissions models. “Bans are unenforceable. You’ve got to foster compromise or the arguments will never stop.”

The tidy town of Carmel-by-the-Sea in California was the first to ban blowers, back in 1975, followed by Beverly Hills in 1978. Manhattan Beach, California, made leaf-blowing a criminal offense subject to a \$1,000 fine and jail time. Hundreds of cities have approved variations, such as prohibiting the noisier gas-fueled models in favor of less powerful and more cumbersome electric or battery-operated models, or limiting the times or months of use. Miami Beach owns 38 gas-powered blowers used by city workers and plans to replace them at a cost of \$48,000.

But ending what some call the “plague” or “pestilence” has met resistance. Newton, Mass., and Maplewood, N.J., are anticipating lawsuits from landscape contractors who claim discrimination (what about construction noise?) and want to rescind summertime restrictions.

Latino lawn maintenance workers protested at city hall in Palo Alto, Calif., and the Association of Latin American Gardeners of Los Angeles once held a hunger strike in front of city hall, arguing that it would take them twice as long to complete jobs without blowers.

“Without this (*leaf blower*), a two-hour job would take four hours,” said Roberto Poveda, who was wearing his 25-pound ... backpack as he worked on a yard in Coral Gables. “For someone like me who has a small outfit, I’d have to hire a helper or ask for higher pay, and customers start crying if you raise rates by \$5.

“It would be nice if people didn’t worry so much about the leaves and I could just cut the grass and not use this thing, but you have to work hard. That’s life.”

The plight of the lawn-care industry, which employs thousands in South Florida, cannot be ignored. The underground economy of unlicensed “Mow, Blow and Go” crews is also vital to a subtropical area where manicuring the jungle is a year-round, labor-intensive endeavor.

“I don’t like the noise of our leaf blowers any more than the next person, but it is time someone spoke up for the honest working bloke who is trying to trim our vast hedges, renovate our huge estates and keep our properties in the pristine condition they deserve. These are the people who help make our privileged lives complete,” Van Stewart wrote to the Palm Beach Daily News during the town’s

heated debate. “Might I suggest that if madam wishes not to hear the leaf blowers that on the day of their arrival she plans to work in a soup kitchen across the bridge.”

Some cities have imposed leaf blower noise limits of 65 decibels from 50 feet away. Most newer blowers emit 65-75 decibels, while older models are in the 80s. By comparison, a library is 40, normal conversation is 60 (for the loud talkers of Miami, make that 65), city traffic or a loud restaurant is 80, listening to “El Chapo” by Skrillex and The Game at max car stereo volume is 95, a chainsaw is 110, an ambulance siren is 120, and a shotgun blast is 170. Keep in mind that decibels are measured on a logarithmic scale, meaning that every increase of ~~10~~ dBs is equivalent to a ~~10~~ fold increase in sound intensity (roughly a doubling in loudness) (*6 dB(A) doubles the sound intensity*). OSHA requires ear protection for noise over 85; noise at that level for eight hours can cause irreparable hearing damage.

It’s not just noise pollution but air pollution that concerns opponents. Leaf blowers stir up dust and particulate matter that can aggravate asthma and other respiratory ailments. Airborne dust that’s inhaled contains mold, pollen, pesticides, animal feces, lead, arsenic, mercury and hydrocarbons.

Listen to Larry Will, a man of science, a peacemaker. The 65-decibel Echo Quiet unit he built 20 years ago with a revolutionary muffler, air-intake sound attenuator and special rattle-deadening plastics has since been refined and manufacturers now offer various low-noise models labeled with the decibel output. The decibel level is measured from a distance of 50 feet.

On older blowers with two-stroke engines, 30 percent of the gas that did not combust came out as a fume-producing pollutant. But tougher 2005 EPA standards have reduced emissions by 90 percent. And, “as for dog feces in the air, you better abolish the lawn mower. Don’t blame the leaf blower,” Will said.

The trick is convincing people to get rid of antiquated blowers and buy new ones. Gas backpacks (\$160-500) are more powerful and expensive than handheld blowers (\$90-220). Electric models that require dragging around a cord (\$30-

110) are less powerful and better for small areas. Cordless battery-powered models (\$150-300) have to be recharged after 30-40 minutes.

“Unfortunately, most commercial contractors don’t feel that noise is an issue,” he said. “One of my struggles is to get them to understand that quiet blowers are not automatically less powerful.”

Will believes that leaf blowers, like leaves, are here to stay but do not have to destroy health or harmony. His website, leafblownoise.com, dispels myths (including the often-cited but inaccurate comparison of a blower’s emissions to that of a Ford F-150 pickup) and provides facts. He has even written a pamphlet, “Leaf Blowers: A Guide to Safe and Courteous Use.” He has given advice to 160 cities that sought his expertise and usually found that bans don’t work because police and code enforcement officers don’t have time to chase, check and issue citations to leaf blower scofflaws.

Will feels your pain. His neatnik neighbor — “his yard is like a park” — runs his blower on Mother’s Day and Christmas. So Will recommends restricting times of use. Don’t use blowers on loose dirt or gravel drives. Throttle down.

Will owns four blowers — an electric one and 2.5- and 3.5-horsepower backpacks and “a really obnoxious old one that I take to demonstrations.”