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BY: WALL STREET JOURNAL

LOWERING THE VOLUME ON LEAF BLOWERS

With new laws limiting the use of leaf blowers, manufacturers have unveiled quieter, more fuel-efficient models.

For years, noisy -- and pollution-spewing -- leaf blowers have served as a source of morning aggravation and have spawned endless quarrels among neighbors. But now, in response to a flurry of new ordinances restricting the gadgets' use, leaf-blower makers are bringing out quieter and more fuel-efficient models.

Manufacturers are introducing blowers that operate at noise levels between 65 and 70 decibels as opposed to older models that operate at 70 decibels or higher. They are also rolling out products with lower emissions to comply with new federal standards. Last fall, the Environmental Protection Agency adopted new emissions limits for small non-road engines -- which include leaf blowers -- that it says will reduce emissions of volatile organic compounds that contribute to air pollution by 34% by 2030.

In January, [Shindaiwa](#) plans to release its EB8520RT blower, which has a 65-decibel-level "hush mode" and which the company says is more fuel efficient than older models. Last summer, [Echo](#) released its PB-255 leaf blower, which operates at 65 decibels. Husqvarna Professional Products came out with a new version of its 356BT backpack blower in 2007, which operates at 64 decibels and has lower emissions than previous models. (Husqvarna says that 70 decibels is about as loud as when a bus or car drives close by.)

Consumers may pay a premium for quieter models. For instance, the Husqvarna blower costs \$470, whereas a comparable blower offered by the same manufacturer with a 74-decibel level costs \$400. (The manufacturer attributes some of the cost difference to the design of the 356BT model.)

The new models seem to be spurring sales. Sales of leaf blowers have increased in recent years, according to a report by market research firm Mintel International. Combined, hand-held and backpack blowers accounted for over 2.8 million shipments in 2007 -- the latest data available -- up from 2.3 million in 2002. The report says that ownership of leaf blowers is highest in the Midwestern and Southern regions of the country.

In the Northeast, the season for leaf blowers is over, but in warmer climates in the South and on the West coast, they are used year-round. People even use them on light snow, manufacturers say.

Environmental groups argue that even blowers that have lower emissions still contribute to the production of ozone and that people who use leaf blowers can accomplish most of the same tasks with a rake. But lawn enthusiasts, manufacturers and landscapers say that the devices save time and human effort. "One of the reasons they sell so well is because they are very effective," says Kris Kiser, spokesman for the [Outdoor Power Equipment Institute](#), a manufacturers' trade group in Alexandria, Va.

People who use leaf blowers regularly on their own lawns say they notice the difference in noise level with the newer models -- but they still have to be careful not to bother the neighbors. Todd Provence, of Redding, Calif., bought a new Husqvarna model in 2007. "This is definitely quieter," says Mr. Provence. He says he uses the blower both for leaves and to clear the sidewalk after he mows his lawn.

But since he lives in a cul-de-sac, certain leaf-blower etiquette still has to be observed. "When you are using power tools in a neighborhood like the one we live in, you definitely don't get up at five in the morning and gas it up," he says.

In the Northeast in 2008, cities including Yonkers, N.Y., and Rye, N.Y., citing noise and environmental concerns, banned leaf blowers for certain months out of the year and set noise limits for the machines. Such ordinances have already proliferated in other parts of the country such as California. The landscape contractors association says 27 cities in the state -- including Los Angeles, Palo Alto and Menlo Park -- have passed leaf-blower bans or restrictions.

Some organizations are encouraging residents to buy the newer, more fuel-efficient models. For instance, South Coast Air Quality Management District, an agency that regulates air pollution in parts of Southern California, runs an annual program that allows landscapers to exchange up to 10 older gas-powered leaf blowers for new models with lower emissions for a fee of just \$200 per blower.

Noisy -- and polluting -- leaf blowers can cause conflict among neighbors. "Kids are breathing in blower exhaust constantly because they are everywhere you go," says Molly Roffman, 47, a Yonkers resident with two children.

The problem is worse in the summer when children are at home during the day, says Ms. Roffman, who brought the issue to the attention of a city council member. Yonkers passed an ordinance in January of last year banning leaf blowers from June through September of each year.

Some health experts also say leaf blowers can cause medical issues. Leaf blowers are not among the largest sources of particle pollution, says Janice Nolen, assistant vice president for national policy and advocacy at the American Lung Association. But they can leak gases that combine to produce ozone. That can especially affect children and people with respiratory problems. Kids are more likely to be affected by high ozone levels because "they have higher respiratory rates than adults," says Sheila Palevsky, president of a New York chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics. "Kids who have asthma or reactive airway disease are going to have more respiratory tract irritation, which results in wheezing."

Landscapers, however, say bans will cost them time and money. The devices "save enormous amounts of time," says Larry Rohlfes, assistant executive director of the California Landscape Contractors Association. "Most landscape-industry estimates suggest it takes five times as long to do the job with a rake."

Critics of leaf-blower bans also point out that enforcement is tricky. Many cities enforce the ordinances through a complaint system, but by the time an officer arrives at the scene, the perpetrator has often packed up and left. In Palo Alto, enforcing the leaf-blower ban is "not the highest priority for the city," says Mayor Larry Klein. "The city could never hire enough people to be checking every gardener in town."

Chuck Lesnick, the city council president in Yonkers, says when he sees someone violating the city's new summer leaf-blower ban, he has "stopped and pulled over and handed them a piece of paper in English and Spanish that says what the law is." Still, enforcing the ban isn't a police priority, he says. "We do have crime problems," Mr. Lesnick says. "We are not going to dispatch our police to enforce this stuff."
