It's cleanup time

BY CURT HARLER

Will the motors of future brushes and mowers be powered by zinc and air? It's not as far-fetched as you might think.

Briggs & Stratton, Milwaukee, WI, is working with a Carlsbad, CA, firm called Metallic Power (MP) to develop power systems based on zinc/air fuel cells.

While they require less power, cell phones using zinc/air batteries are commonplace. Some power backup systems for personal computers also use zinc/air. In fact, most applications between one and 10 kilowatts are candidates for zinc/air.

The zinc/air system is a completely closed-loop system with nothing to add, nothing to discard, and nothing wasted, the companies say. The cell is safe and three times as energy efficient as gasoline. Californians will be happy to hear that the system reuses the zinc over and over, is quiet and completely zero emission — so CARB standards are no hassle. "It can be used indoors," says Jeff Colborn, CEO of MP.

The demo unit MP delivered last year fulfilled Briggs & Stratton's test requirements. The companies say they hope to work on prototype projects in the future.

The system consists of a zinc-recycling unit as well as zinc/air fuel cells. Zinc pellets one millimeter in diameter combine with oxygen from the air in the presence of an electrolyte, forming zinc oxide — the same stuff used in skin creams and sun block.

The recycling unit uses wall electricity to convert the zinc oxide back to fresh zinc, which is then recombined with the electrolyte to be reused.

The companies figure the cost of zinc/air to be comparable to gas-powered units.

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Don’t bristle over sweepers

On the job, the question is not “paper or plastic?” Rather, it’s whether bristles of nylon, rubber, or steel do the best job for removing debris.

David Vick, general manager of sales at RedMax, recommends using a nylon brush for cleaning grass clippings, wood chips, sawdust, mulch or other debris from sidewalks.

Rubber paddles work better to clean debris from new construction sites or for removing light snow from walks or driveways. Likewise, the rubber version should be better for cleaning up aeration plugs or smoothing sand traps.

Some manufacturers are moving from steel bristles to polypropylene bristle sets. “We have used steel bristles but found them to wear and take a set at a much faster rate than the poly,” says Dwayne Shaufler of Sno-Way. He notes the poly strips can be rotated periodically from front to back for even longer life.

Keep in mind that bristle brushes are more gentle on new seedings. If the job involves rock picking or heavy debris, however, go with steel.

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