

Roland Taylor has a whale of a time investigating the world of leaf blowers...

Thar' she blows!

Within the next two months most readers will be faced with the annual task of clearing up nature's bounty of discarded leaves. This work can be highly labour intensified and time consuming. As there is no forewarning of the actual days when it will happen, like a good boy scout, being prepared will save a lot of last minute hassle.

Thar' she blows!



Manufacturers have not skimmed on the range of machinery on offer and so there is plenty to choose from.

What you will actually require depends on your specific circumstances.

It may be that more than one machine is the answer to get the job done quickly and efficiently.

In this feature we will be looking at the different systems and equipment available plus the type of areas where they would be of biggest benefit.

Moving leaves can be done in three ways: High-velocity air, Vacuum and Rotary action.

Air

To create an airflow requires some form of impeller and aero-dynamics play an important part in its design and the housing in which it is mounted. The unit works at high speed and so balance is critical, as are the materials used in its construction. One of the main reasons for this will be clear when we come to vacuuming.

'Air broom' is an apt description of how these machines are used - the leaves are blown into windrows ready for collection.

Three versions are available hand held, backpacks or larger walk behind units. Generally speaking,

the small blowers are used to clear leaves from confined spots.

On large open areas the walk behinds can be used to bring leaves into one collection spot.

Vacuum

To expel air requires some form of intake and designers of leaf and litter clearing equipment have used this principle to create a collecting system. Leaves and debris are picked up in the airflow and pass through the impeller into a receptacle, or through tubing into a trailer. Not only does this provide collection, but on most machines the material is also considerably

reduced in volume. This has two advantages. Firstly, more can be collected thus reducing the number of times the unit has to be emptied and secondly, the leaves are chopped up and their fibres exposed. This enables micro-organisms to work on the material and considerably accelerates the decomposing process.

One possible downside, especially on smaller hand-held blower/vacs is that any dust, sand or small stones in the litter can cause wear to the impeller as the material passes through the machine.

An alternative collection system is available although this is largely

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confined to the domestic sector. This entails blowing air at high speed down a tube and directing it at the end over a curved surface. A low-pressure area is created which draws in more air causing a powerful vacuum effect, with debris sucked into this vortex and passing directly into a collector. An advantage of this method is that material does not pass through the impeller. However, these units are generally designed more for the domestic consumer than the professional.

Vacuum types of machine come in three configurations: hand-held, walk behind and tractor driven.

The smaller units are usually con-

version kits for a portable blower and one disadvantage is the size of the collector, so they are generally only ideal in this mode for areas where access is very limited.

The pedestrian operated machines are either pushed or self-propelled with a wide range of engine sizes. Most models have the option of a wanderhose which is ideal for getting into awkward spaces such as drains and culverts, as well as emptying litter bins. Some machines have a facility for dealing with light brushwood and twigs.

Also available are specialist machines for dealing with hard sur-

faces such as car parks and walk ways. This type of unit is ideal where a course is part of a hotel or country club complex.

For wide-open spaces there are tractor-mounted versions, which are either driven from the PTO or have their own engine. The hopper on some models includes high-lift emptying.

Another piece of equipment that falls into this category is the loader. This is a unit that is directly attached to the side of a trailer, skip or vehicle.

A large diameter hose enables the operator to suck up large volumes of leaves directly into the recepta-

cle, ready for transporting to a dumping site.

Rotary Brushes

Usually driven from the PTO of a tractor, being either front or rear mounted. The latter often includes some form of collecting facility. This type of system will work on grass but is generally better suited to hard surfaces.

Flail

Like the rotary brushes, they are tractor-driven. In addition to collecting leaves and litter they can be used for scarifying and for cutting grass. There are some very large units that include a vacuum system for loading into a built-in trailer.

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Thar' she blows!



Alternative systems

Most rotary mowers, whether walk-behind, ride on or attachments for compact tractors with a collecting facility, can cope with leaves on turf.

What do you need to know?

With all this equipment available there is a machine to deal with virtually every situation that one is likely to encounter during leaf fall. To ensure that coping with this operation is both cost effective and efficiently carried out, some pre planning and groundwork is advisable. A survey of all the areas that will require clearing is recommended, and special attention should be paid to the following:

1. Accessibility - leaves often get into the most awkward spots.
2. The volume to be handled is a major consideration as loading and unloading can take up a considerable amount of time.
3. Where are the leaves going to be deposited and what will happen to the decomposed material eventually?

Once an overall picture has been drawn up, it is time to investigate what machinery is available. Exhibitions, magazines, directories and the Internet are all sources of who makes what. Obtain as much information as possible. This can be found in literature and by talking to other members of your profession or closely related groups such as groundsmen, local authorities and contractors. When it comes to clearing up leaves, everyone has similar problems. Research can be productive, but is only the beginning. The next stage is to consult a specialist. He can advise on the suitable machinery for your specific requirements and arrange that all-important demonstration. This is the evaluation stage, a time to see the machine's abilities, speed of operation and efficiency in dealing with situations like collecting wet material.

It is also an opportunity to find out much more such as who already uses the equipment and can they



be contacted - a third party recommendation is always valuable. Check availability of replacement parts and their cost. Length of warranty on components is another area worth investigating. As mentioned earlier, the impeller is at the heart of most leaf blowers or collecting systems and its construction and the material used are vital to the life of a machine. Some models on the market carry a five-year guarantee - a benefit worth having.

Before making a final decision, the question should be asked. - "Is there enough work to justify the expenditure, or would hire be a more cost effective option?" This has the obvious advantage of not tying up capital, but the days when the leaves fall cannot be predicted. The equipment may not be available on the days you require it. One alternative to this scenario might be to have machinery on the fleet for the bulk of the work and hire any extra units when required.

Leaves have a habit of falling at the most inopportune times and so plans are needed to ensure that when it happens both machinery and staff are in place to carry out the clear up operation speedily and effectively. Now is the ideal time to address the handling of this annual event and discover what is available to make it as free from hassle as possible.