

That noise you hear...

...is the sound of people who complain about inconsiderate leaf blower operators. Keep the neighbors happy and avoid bad publicity through thoughtful backpack blower use.

By AMY STEPHENS

There are many ways blower operators can be more sensitive to concerns people have about this type of equipment, and still get their work done in a timely manner.

By now we've all heard the stories of communities objecting to blower noise on the streets, of neighborhood residents campaigning against blower use around their homes, of officials in cities like Los Angeles seeking blower bans of one type or another. Blowers, plain and simple, are taking it in the neck right now.

Like a lot of situations where public "bandwagons" develop and the media gets into the fray, there's misinformation being spread. Fact is, there are things about

blowers that are good — their speed, mobility and efficiency at sweeping flower beds, sidewalks, driveways and other areas — and things that can cause trouble — their whining noise, the dust they blow up, and the times of day crews use them.

Don't tamper with equipment

There's just no substitute for quality. It'll cost more, and you'll have to take better care of it, but it'll run better, last longer, and give you more precise service and performance over time than any bargain you buy. A lot of better equipment is quieter and has been tested and is labeled as meeting EPA emission regulations.

- ▶ Proper tuning and maintenance are a must.
- ▶ Make sure you operate your power

Update on blower restrictions

Gasoline powered leaf blowers would be regulated by the state of California if SB1651 becomes law.

All blowers sold and those in use for commercial purposes after Jan. 1 2000 could not exceed set maximum noise levels.

The bill would establish a trade-in program for blowers that do not meet state standards.

Violators would be fined \$100 to \$500 for each infraction.

The legislation would also prohibit city and county governments from regulating the use of gasoline-powered leaf blowers except between the hours of 6 pm and 8 am on weekdays and between the hours of 5 pm and 9 am on weekends.

Testing and certification program would be established under the law, and would establish a trade-in program for gas blowers that do not meet certain specified standards, which would apply to all gas-powered leaf blowers sold in the state and to gas-powered leaf blowers used for commercial purposes.

Robin Pendergrast of the International Marketing Exchange, which represents blower manufacturer Echo, says he has seen "a collective effort by a lot of different players [in the leaf blower controversy]; from dealers, to consumers, to municipalities, contractors, the California Landscape Contractors Association, and some manufacturers." These people, says Pendergrast, want to act together to keep these restrictions—and certainly, any bans—to a minimum.

"It's not as cohesive as I would like, but there is a sustained effort," says Pendergrast. □



tools within the specs provided by the manufacturer (they're in your owner's manual if you need to check). There are engineering reasons for those specs, and if you change the exhaust, throttle configuration, fuel, or whatever, you defeat them.

► Use high octane fuel and a best quality 50:1 mix oil. Keep your two-stroke tools tuned properly,

too. If they are tuned and still smoke — a big red flag for some critics — consider switching to a low-smoke or smokeless oil.

► You can also get a biodegradable chain oil for chain saws. Don't use motor oil or transmission fluid. Keep all cutting blades sharp. That way, you'll use less power and less time to get the same amount of work done.

► Pay attention to the noise you're making. Buy low-noise tools to begin with, then use only as much power as you need. Don't race the engine if you don't have to. Lawns and flower beds can be swept at lower rpms (and hence with less noise). If your unit has a centrifugal clutch, though, watch to make sure it's engaging fully at lower rpms, and adjust as necessary.

► Keep the muffler on your machine and replace it when it wears out. This caution is not just for the neighbors, it also will protect your ears, which can be affected by continuous noise.

► Limit the number of blowers you run at one time. Stagger the sweeping instead, so only a few machines are on.

► Consider the people around you. Get to know your customers' schedules. Take the time to go around the neighborhood and ask people the best times (as far as they're concerned) to do yard work. Find out if there are local restrictions in effect on tool operation.

Note this information, customer names, etc. in a book that you and your crews can consult. Update it by phone every so often. This preparation delivers many benefits. It lets the local people know who you are, that you're trying to be sensitive, that you're accountable. It gives you more positive knowledge of the area and its concerns. And it opens the door to forming positive relationships. □

—The author is a freelance writer based in Portland, Ore.

Bad attitude will blow you away

It's human nature for people to be reasonable, and you should be able to work out compromises for most situations. Some examples:

Work on apartment building landscapes in the early morning is usually a bad idea. Instead, **schedule the work** to minimize the impact on residents. Do quiet work first, and watch for cars leaving (for work).

Make sure debris you blow doesn't end up littering somebody else's property.

When **disposing of oil** and gasoline, do it properly. Don't just dump it.

You can make points with customers and communities by thinking about safety, too. **Check your work area** for material that'll become a hazard if airborne, like rocks, metal objects. **Make warning signs** (maybe on A-frames) indicating that pets, kids, etc. should be kept at least 50 feet away from machines while they're running, and place them where you're working. You could provide this same information on a printed sheet you include with your new-customer kits.

Take **wind conditions** into account. If there are a lot of open windows and doors, sweep somewhere else first. Let the engine idle a few minutes to warm up. **Use lower speeds** to blow leaves from grass or beds. Jack it up as necessary for walks and patios. Go as fast as you can.

Pay attention to gas spills. It may surprise you, but more than 20 percent of the emissions coming from two-cycle tools are the result of fuel spills. So if you're careful and don't spill any — there are tools like spillproof canisters, the Shurpours gas nozzle (developed by an Idahoan), and simple funnels that'll eliminate the problem — then you've reduced pollution significantly already, without ever starting the job.

Besides using lower speeds, you can cut the dust you raise sweeping by first sprinkling or **hosing down areas** to be swept. Try alternative tools. There are some communities that have already adopted blower restrictions, so it doesn't matter how careful you are, you can't use the tools. In these cases, think of alternatives that'll work for you, which can mean anything from using hand tools to changing your service contract with your customer.

Where large area cleanup on turf or pavement is necessary, there is a power tool that will work. It's called a PowerBroom, it's manufactured by Shindaiwa, and it's intended for most sweeping and raking tasks. The tool looks like a straight shaft trimmer except for the lower end which is a spinning drum with rubber-like DuPont Alcryn fins. It works for snow removal, for sweeping gravel out of grass, cleaning up sawdust, raking leaves and sticks, spreading mulch and bark chips, backfilling irrigation trenches, sweeping or removing water from paved areas, cleaning up dropped fruit and seed pods...all without harming the turf. □