



The smell of the gasoline, the roar of the leaf blower

Anybody besides me hate the howling of gas-powered leaf blowers disrupting the peace at 8 a.m. sharp?

“But blasting fallen foliage with powerful winds isn’t just problematic because of the noise,” the Washington Post recently reported. “Gasoline-powered leaf blowers also spew toxic chemicals and planet-warming emissions into the air and disrupt natural habitats, experts say.”

Many leaf blowers are powered by two-stroke engines, which run on a mix of oil and gas and emit toxic pollutants. A new report found that in 2020 gas-powered lawn and garden equipment across the U.S. put into the air:

- 68,000 tons of nitrogen oxides.
- 350,000 tons of volatile organic compounds.
- 20 million pounds of benzene, a carcinogen.
- 30 million tons of carbon dioxide — equal to 6.75 million cars — and 18,000 tons of methane, both of which fuel climate change.

In Pennsylvania alone, they produced an estimated 965 tons of fine particulates — which can penetrate to lungs and exacerbate asthma and other breathing issues — equivalent to more than 10 million cars.

About 60 municipalities, including D.C., already restrict gas/oil lawn tools. California is banning the sale of new gas leaf blowers and Lower Merion township is reviewing a phased-in ban.

“The EPA says clearly that these two-stroke engines produce carcinogens,” said Seth Lieberman of Quiet Clean Philly. “They produce benzene, butadiene, formaldehyde. This is not crazy science. In the city of Philadelphia, 1 in 5 kids have asthma. So why the heck would we be spraying these fumes throughout the city?”

In addition to the engines, said Karen Jubanyik, an emergency medicine physician at Yale University, “they’re blowing all the stuff that’s on the ground up into the air: herbicides, fungicides, pesticides and metals, including lead.” Add pollutants that fall on our grass from nearby I-476.

The noise frequency of gas leaf blowers allows harmful levels of sound to travel long distances and readily penetrates walls and windows. And David Mizejewski, a naturalist with the National Wildlife Federation, says that clearing the fallen leaves with a leaf blower also disrupts the habitats for critical pollinating species such as bees, butterflies and moths, as well as amphibians and small mammals like chipmunks.

Applause to Steve Pargeon, TMR’s director of buildings and grounds, for employing an *electric* leaf blower on our terrace and walks.

The lawn service with which TMR recently signed a five-year contract still uses gas/oil-powered equipment, saying electric costs too much and is not powerful enough to deal with the size of our grounds. Electric technology is rapidly advancing, however, and perhaps the service could consider switching in the near future. Meanwhile, reducing the area — and changing the hours — of its leaf blowing would be welcome.

Maybe we even can dream of going Back to the Future. I just submitted this entry to The New Yorker magazine’s cartoon caption contest:



"Advanced life forms eliminated leaf blowers eons ago."

—Terry Shepard