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# The Growing Movement to Ban Leaf Blowers



By [Gemma Alexander](#)

OCT 25, 2022 [gas-powered garden equipment](#), [leaf blowers](#)



Few things are as pleasant as spending a quiet autumn morning on the porch with a cup of coffee, listening to wind rustle the leaves on the trees, and watching as they drift to the ground. Except the roar of a leaf blower somewhere in the neighborhood nearly always destroys that scenario. Our quest to create tidy, visually pleasing landscapes seems destined to drive everyone indoors. But the tide may be turning on some gas-powered garden equipment.

## Worse Than Noise

Even people who use leaf blowers acknowledge that they are obnoxiously loud. The [sound level](#) for the person holding a leaf blower exceeds 100 decibels, and those levels exceed World Health Organization outdoor daytime standards of 55 decibels for up to 800 feet (in many neighborhoods, that's more than two [blocks](#) away).

But leaf blowers do more harm than just making noise. [Gas-powered landscape equipment](#) has an outsized environmental impact. In California, leaf blowers contribute more to pollution than vehicles. Most models utilize a two-stroke

### What Do You Think?

#### Are you considering moving because of climate change?

- I'm researching my options to decide
- Yes
- No

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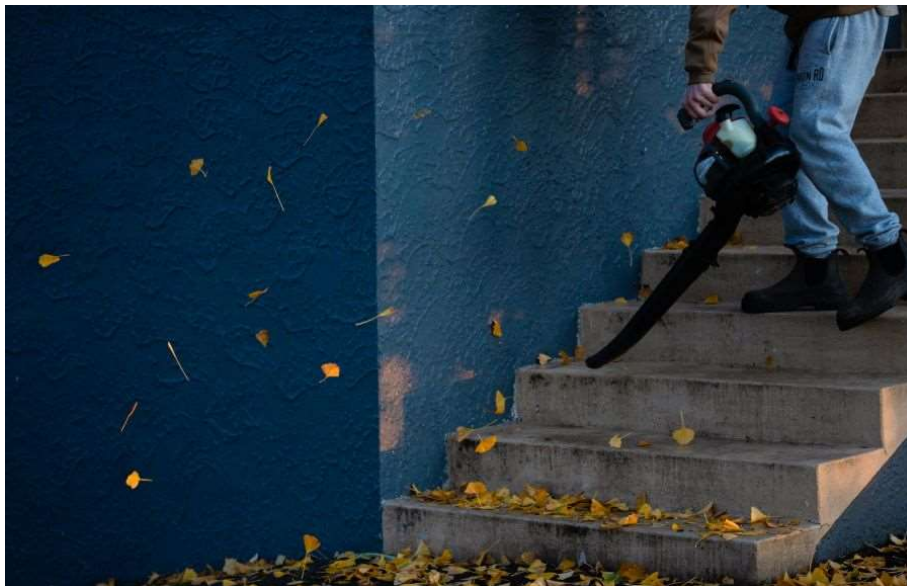
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engine where only 70% of the fuel completely combusts. As a result, [two-stroke engines](#) produce nearly 300 times the greenhouse gas emissions of a pickup truck.

Blowers blast air up to [280 miles per hour](#), which can erode topsoil and disperses pollen, fertilizers, and herbicides in the air. Insects can be blasted from their habitats and birds are driven away.

## Environmental Justice

The people using the machines experience the most impact. While the noise is an irritation to neighbors, the user (even wearing ear protection) is at risk for [permanent hearing loss](#) from cumulative exposure to high volume. The machine operator is also at ground zero for [exposure to the pollutants](#) – like carbon monoxide and unburned fuel – released. Landscape workers running a leaf blower inhale 10 times more ultra-fine particles than someone standing next to a busy road. A homeowner may choose that risk for an hour on the weekend. But the people who are most affected are landscape workers. Nationally, [46% of landscape workers](#) are Latino, a group that already suffers the disproportional impacts of [environmental injustice](#).



While leaf blowers seem best suited to scatter leaves – usually into the street where they clog storm drains, they are meant to blow leaves into a pile. Photo: [Callum Hill](#), Unsplash

## Leaf Blower Bans

Leaf blowers were invented in the early 1970s, and the [first bans](#) began shortly afterward in two California cities, Carmel-by-the-Sea in 1975 and Beverly Hills in 1978. Today, there's growing momentum across the nation to ban or limit gas-powered leaf blowers – [more than 100](#) municipalities already have some restrictions in place.

But the bans have their own opponents. Perhaps ironically, considering the health risks, landscape workers are among the most vocal. [They claim](#) one employee with a gas-powered leaf blower is equal to two workers with manual tools, and that there simply aren't enough workers to meet demand without them. Many homeowners also believe that gas-powered blowers are better.

Some landscape companies have already begun to [convert to all-electric equipment](#) and have found customers willing to pay a higher rate for cleaner, quieter crews. But the cost of converting could be too much for some smaller, low-cost landscape companies. Batteries for some commercial-quality electric

blowers can cost \$1,800. A successful ban would therefore require more than enforcement; rebate programs have been important in [California](#) and [Washington, D.C.](#)

## Better Blowers

In 2014, the City of Seattle considered but rejected switching to electric leaf blowers because they were [ineffective](#), especially in the city's often wet conditions. However, in the eight years since the city last considered them, electric blowers have improved. Today, performance [ratings](#) for [electric leaf blowers](#) are as high as for gas-powered ones, and the city is reconsidering the switch. Electric leaf blowers are also quieter than gas, but there are differences among leaf blowers of the same type – look for one that [scores well](#) for noise exposure.

If you are hiring a landscape company, be willing to pay for one that uses electric equipment and let them know that you value [worker safety](#). Make sure they provide adequate PPE for their workers. In addition to ear protection, blower operators should wear safety goggles to protect them from flying debris blown along with the leaves, and a dust mask.

## Blowing Better

According to [Bob Vila](#) and [Home Depot](#), there is a right way to use leaf blowers – and it doesn't look very much like what you usually see people doing. Leaf blowers seem best suited to scatter leaves – usually [into the street](#), which clogs storm drains and may be illegal. But they are meant to blow leaves into a pile. Ideally, the pile should be on top of a tarp that can be lifted and dumped into a collection bin. Leaf blowers should be used to collect the bulk of leaves (leaving strays to the rake) and to clear out areas where a rake doesn't fit. Using a leaf blower as intended will result in a lot less time with the motor running, and much lower emissions.

But there's another way to deal with leaves that takes even less work. Instead of collecting the leaves for disposal, blow them into flower beds as mulch. And while you do need to clear driveways and sidewalks, you can [let leaves lie](#) when they fall on the grass or other planting areas. It might be lazy, but it's also good for your garden; leaf litter doesn't have to be composted before it can contribute to [soil health](#).

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