

ON 'LAWN ISLAND,' NOISY GAS

Landscapers fed up, but electric has cost, battery issues

ONLY IN NEWSDAY

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When John Russell moved to Port Jefferson near Mount Sinai Harbor, he envisioned walks near the water surrounded by trees and vast open space. He imagined quiet.

And then he heard it: the gas-powered leaf blower. The Bose noise-canceling headphones he purchased for \$300 were no match for the barrage of blowers bombarding the air with their gnawing drone, Russell said.

"There's no way," he said, "to get away from the noise."

Gas-powered leaf blowers have long grated on Long Islanders, with their dull motors piercing the suburban quiet and pumping pollutants into the air. Prolonged exposure can lead to health problems, including lung damage and heart disease. Several municipalities on Long Island are regulating their use and stepping up efforts to enforce gas blower bans.

There is a growing push for landscapers to embrace electric blowers, which tend to be quieter and less proficient polluters. But the battery-powered devices are not nearly as efficient, landscapers say. Making the switch would mean longer hours to complete jobs, some landscapers insist, and force them to raise prices.

So as landscapers scatter across Long Island for spring cleanups, most are doing so in a familiar posture: Gas-powered engines on their backs, blower tubes in their hands.

That's part of why the region has earned the nickname "Lawn Island," said Jim Paymar, a Rockville Centre resident.

"There's a certain expectation here to make your property look like everyone else's property so that it kind of melds together and looks nice," Paymar said. "It does keep property values up."

On Long Island, lawns can be a status symbol in a region with



Kevin Boodram, center, started Serenity Lawncare, which exclusively uses electric and robotic landscaping tools. Worker Marvin Vasquez is

a much higher median household income than the national median. The calculation to stay the course — despite gas blowers' drawbacks — comes down to dollars and cents: Landscapers don't want to charge more, because they know clients won't want to pay more.

"We're doing this to literally feed our families," said Aldo Calabrese, president of Calabrese & Sons Landscaping Contractors in Port Washington. "We would need to spend two to three times longer for the same services. If we had to charge our clients two to three times more for the services, believe me, we'd have a mutiny on our hands."

Health effects of noise

Dr. Norman Edelman, a pulmonologist, professor of internal medicine and core member of the Program in Public

Health at Stony Brook University, said exposure could lead to both short- and long-term health problems.

The devices distribute dust and dirt in the air — large particles that can cause acute symptoms when they get into people's eyes, nose and throat. Those with asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease are at risk for further damage because of very fine particles triggered by the blowers that burrow deep in the lung.

"Those engines, when they're gas-powered, are dirty old engines," Edelman said in an interview. "It's like a car in the 1950s with no pollution control."

And then there's the noise. Jamie Banks, founder and president of Quiet Communities, a Massachusetts nonprofit dedicated to promoting quiet as a "valuable natural resource," said

in an interview that the noise blowers produce "is far in excess of safe levels, both for workers and for the nearby public."

The blowers create low-frequency sounds that can be heard from long distances and penetrate walls and windows, she said. The blowers' volumes can reach as high as 105 decibels at the ear of the operator and up to 83 decibels from 50 feet away. For comparison, a train horn is required to operate between 96 and 110 decibels, according to the Federal Railroad Administration's website.

"You can hear it very clearly in your home, and so you're taking away the ability of people to enjoy their own home and control their own environment," Banks said.

The devices can affect mental health. People exposed to high levels of noise are also at a

greater risk of anxiety and depression, Banks said.

"Noise affects a part of the brain called the amygdala that is responsible for emotional, fear stress reactions," she said. "It sets off this stress cascade — that leads to inflammation and oxidative stress — that affect the brain, our mental health and psychology, as well as eventually cause damage to the linings of our blood vessels."

"That sound, when you're hearing it every day, and for hours on end, it's really chronic stress that you're being exposed to," Banks said.

Bans hard to enforce

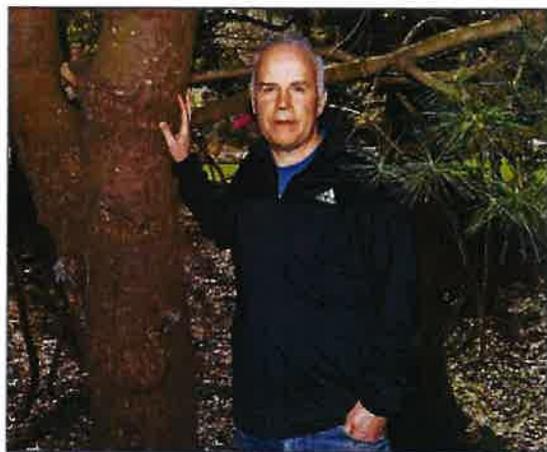
The Village of Southampton stretches about six square miles, with homes more densely packed in the village center.

When landscapers use gas-

BLOWERS ARE STILL THE RULE



at left, and Luis Riviera at right.



"There's no way to get away from the noise," John Russell says.

WHAT NEWSDAY FOUND

- **Health experts say noise** and pollution from gas-powered leaf blowers are harmful to the workers who use them and to people in their vicinity. They can cause respiratory issues and affect mental health.
- **Long Islanders are increasingly frustrated** with the blowers, arguing they are disruptive to their quality of life. A growing number of Long Islanders have urged municipalities to better regulate the technology.
- **Landscapers say electric-powered leaf blowers** are inefficient and that it will take longer for them to complete their jobs — resulting in higher prices for homeowners.

powered leaf blowers, the buzzing sound can be difficult to escape, resident Kimberly Allan said in an interview.

"You could have somebody who has a gas leaf blower going to the left, to the right, to the front, to the back of you," Allan, a former village trustee, said. "It's like being on an aircraft carrier with 20 helicopters."

Southampton bans the blowers year-round. Mayor William Manger said in an interview that most landscapers in the village have switched to electric blowers.

"If someone was using a gas-powered leaf blower and a neighbor reported it to code enforcement, usually our code enforcement would respond right then and there," Manger said.

Several other municipalities have adopted permanent or seasonal bans on gas blowers.

In North Hempstead, where the blowers are prohibited from mid-June until mid-September, violators face fines ranging from \$500 to \$10,000.

This summer, town officials say they will be more precise in their enforcement of the ban, Newsday previously reported. Instead of conducting inspections the day after a reported code violation, officers will do so the following week at the same date and time, to line up with landscapers' schedules.

"It's like a cat-and-mouse game," North Hempstead Councilwoman Christine Liu said in an interview. "The cat can't catch the mouse at that moment, but if the mouse is there at the same time every week, it'll happen."

Parking officers will also be monitoring for potential violators — though they cannot issue tickets. They plan to distribute educational flyers to

landscapers.

On the East End, the towns of East Hampton and Southampton also maintain seasonal bans on the blowers, while the Village of Greenport prohibits them year-round.

Greenport's ban went into effect Jan. 1, so it's too early to tell what impact the new legislation will have on noise in the village, resident Hilary North said.

But in summers past, North said, the noise drones on, especially late in the week.

"These landscape companies, they want to be efficient," she said. "If they have five or six clients on one street, they're going to go from one house to the next . . . but that means it goes on for hours."

In November, Huntington approved a measure that would have started to wind down the use of the devices in January of this year. But in February, the town board voted to stay the ap-

proval of those restrictions after landscapers pushed back.

Time- and date-based restrictions remain in place on weekends and between Memorial Day and Labor Day, said Christine Geed, a spokeswoman for Huntington Town. Last year, the town received 175 noise complaints, with gas-powered leaf blowers accounting for most of the calls. The town collected \$3,608 in fines for leaf blower violations in 2024, Geed said.

In the Village of Upper Brookville, officials in 2022 conducted a survey of residents as they considered a ban on gas-powered leaf blowers during the summer months. From a total of 170 responses, 84% opposed a ban, Mayor Elliot Conway said.

In Smithtown, there are no restrictions on the use of gas blowers, but spokeswoman Nicole Garguilo said the town implemented an incentive for commercial landscapers in July 2023 to "support environmentally responsible landscaping practices and encourage the transition to cleaner, quieter equipment." The public safety department waives the \$50 registration filing fee for any new commercial landscaper who can provide proof of purchase of five or more battery-powered landscaping tools within the last year.

But the town hasn't received a single application so far, Garguilo said.

Calabrese, the Port Washington landscaper who said he was part of a group that helped craft North Hempstead's rules on gas blowers, said there are still those who flout the restrictions regularly.

"They start early in the morning, they finish late at night, they work on holidays, they work on Sundays," Calabrese said. "It makes all gardeners look bad."

An issue of power

Landscapers say they understand residents' concerns.

But Evan Dackow, president of Jolly Green Tree and Shrub Care and a board member of the 1,700-member Landscape Contractors Association of Long Island, said electric blowers simply don't have the necessary "amount of newtons of force to push a pile of leaves from point A to point B."

"The output on the electric is less," Dackow said in an interview. The battery life is shortened on cold days, so they're more difficult to use in early spring and late fall. "A battery that should be lasting an hour now is lasting 15 minutes."

Dackow said he knew of some landscapers who switched to electric-powered head trimmers and top-handled chain saws. But not blowers.

Kevin Boodram, owner of Huntington-based Serenity Lawncare, has taken a different path.

Stuck in his father's Glen Oaks, Queens, home during the pandemic, Boodram became frustrated by noise from the gas blowers. Instead of going to law school, he decided to open a landscaping company that exclusively uses electric and robotic landscaping tools.

Boodram, 24, told Newsday he saves thousands of dollars annually. He said he's also received nearly \$23,000 in grants from competitions hosted at Georgetown's business school. "Financially, it made total sense for me," Boodram said. "It's such a win-win, in my opinion. We're doing what's best for the community, what's best for the environment, and also what's best for our safety."

The State Senate is considering legislation to create a rebate incentivizing landscapers to use electric lawn equipment, Newsday reported in March.

Bonnie Sager, the co-founder of Huntington CALM, or Clean Alternative Landscaping Methods, has been calling for tighter gas blower regulations for years. Sager doesn't contract with a landscaper. Her husband uses an electric leaf blower to clear the lawn a few times per year, she said. But mostly she lets the leaves sit on the ground; they are a natural fertilizer, after all.

"Mother Nature is pretty smart, she knows what she's doing," Sager said. "We tend to mess things up."

Eventually, Sager said, the leaves disintegrate back into the earth.

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