



Environment

The Backyard Besieged

Environmentalists and regulators want to stifle that suburban icon, the noisy, air-fouling lawn mower

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Ah, the joys of summer. The scent of fresh-cut grass. Water sprinklers spraying. Flowers flourishing by the porch. Neatly trimmed hedges. The American suburban dream in full bloom.

But wait! There's trouble in paradise. You can hear it on most summer mornings and evenings, and sometimes all day long, in the distance or as close as your next-door neighbor's: the whine and roar of power lawn mowers, leaf blowers, chain saws and other unbelievably grating gizmos, grinding away to keep that cherished patch of lawn tidy and green.

And the noise is the least of it. It turns out that America's 89 million small garden engines are fouling the very land they tend. Gas-guzzling lawn mowers, leaf blowers, weed cutters and the like produce 5% of U.S. air pollution overall, and a good deal more in many metropolitan areas. A dirty, inefficient 3.5-hp. gas mower emits the same amount of hydrocarbons in one hour as does a new car driven 340 miles. A chain saw operated for two hours produces hydrocarbons equivalent to those emitted by a new car driven 3,000 miles. Furthermore, the Environmental Protection Agency estimates that 17 million gal. of fuel are spilled each year just refueling such equipment -- more than the amount spilled by the Exxon Valdez in the Gulf of Alaska in 1989.

It's enough to start a grass-roots rebellion -- and it has. Across the nation from Greenwich, Connecticut, to Palo Alto, California, environmentalists and their allies are taking aim at the noisy machines that rule the neighborhood from May to October. In Takoma Park, Maryland, for instance, free-lance writer Mike Tidwell founded Citizens Against Lawn Mower Madness, a group seeking to limit use of gas mowers in the town. Says Tidwell: "I'm committed to spreading the gospel of power-mower reform."

So is the Federal Government. Last month the EPA proposed the first nationwide emissions standards for mowers, garden tractors and other gas-powered garden machinery. The regulations go into effect next year, and by 2003 they are expected to reduce hydrocarbon emissions produced by such equipment 32% and carbon-monoxide emissions 14%.

California is moving even faster and further. The Golden State, which in 1963 became the first to regulate automobile emissions, last year became the first to set strict standards for garden machinery: "the single largest unregulated source of carbon-monoxide and hydrocarbon emissions," according to the California Air Resource Board. Under the new regulations, emissions must be reduced 45% by 1995 and an additional 55% by 1999. The board estimates that annual pollution from small engines in the state is equivalent to 3.5 million new cars running a distance of 16,000 miles each.

The new regulations have sent the power-mower industry scrambling to redesign engines.

Conservation-minded consumers are already turning to alternatives, including the old-fashioned, human-powered reel mower. No longer the cumbersome clunks common in the '40s, new models are lighter and quieter, with a tempered blade that stays sharp longer. They require no gas and, at \$100 and under, cost far less than most power mowers -- besides providing a good aerobic workout. Indiana-based American Lawn Mower Co., the leading manufacturer of reel mowers, reports its sales have risen 135% in the past five years. "After World War II," says Teri McClaine, a sales administrator with the company, "to buy a power mower was kind of a status symbol. In a lot of areas, some people have turned around now and said, 'Hey, wait a minute! Technology is not necessarily better.'"

Another option: electric mowers. Until recently, most required unwieldy and potentially dangerous cords, but the newer models are cordless and rechargeable. They need no gas, oil, starter rope or tune-ups, and they start with the touch of a button. Typical electricity use for a quarter-acre lawn mowed once a week for six months, says Joel Makower, editor of the Green Business Letter in Washington, is about the same as that for a toaster. Not surprisingly, a national consortium of 25 electric utilities has formed the CLEANER Lawn-Care Project, and in selected cities is offering to take gas-powered mowers from 1,000 customers in exchange for new, cordless electric mowers.

The best solution, ecologically speaking, is for homeowners to rethink the entire notion of the Great American Lawn -- and its ordeal of care. "People are almost brainwashed into thinking they must have a lawn. But it's outrageous how much goes into keeping one up," says D. Arvid Adams, whose company, Urban Earthworks, has been designing yards for San Francisco Bay residents for eight years. Adams suggests low-growing ground covers like chamomile and dichondra, which require little water and no mowing at all. "You don't need to have a lawn to showcase your house," he says. And just consider the peace and quiet.