

From the Takoma Park Voice

E-mail Q&A with Larry Will, former Vice President of Engineering at blower manufacturer Echo Inc. (10/16/2007)

Dear Mr. Davies:

Below are my comments regarding your issues with the leaf blower:

Your comments are in italics: *Thank you for your defense of leaf blowers. I have to say, I'm not convinced, as I have seen the machines used incorrectly and discourteously -- two or more used at one time, or used for hours at a time, or used on gravel and dusty surfaces for no reason other than the guys were hired to "clean" the property. I see little lawn "care" going on. Mostly I see undertrained laborers blowing everything they can to the curb into the street or into someone else's yard*

I wish what you say above were not true, but it is. Unfortunately, many operators are untrained. Perhaps 99% are untrained. Many do not even speak English. It seems as though this unfortunate truth will not change without some sort of legal requirement. We, the industry have tried to make this possible. You saw the OPEI manual, which is in English and Spanish and is a good start. Also available from my web site is an English and Spanish manual put together by Echo which is far more detailed. There is also a flash presentation from OPEI and a PowerPoint from Echo that can be used to inform individual operators. Unfortunately, we have not yet converted these electronic presentations to Spanish. Training, however, is the only way to solve the problems you mention above.

*The OPEI guide contradicts itself. It explicitly states: "Do not operate while standing on a ladder, rooftop, tree or other unstable surface. " Yet it also says blowers are used to clean rain gutters. How do you clean your rain gutters without getting up on a ladder or on a roof?*

The statement in the manual is correct, but I can see why it doesn't seem to be so. There are attachments for the leaf blower that reach above the gutter of a one-story house with a reverse curve, which can be used either to blow debris out of the gutter or vacuum it out if used with a shred-N-Vac.

*It also says they shouldn't be used indoors. But the manual also says they can be used to clean arenas. I'm sure it means "outdoor" arenas, but that isn't specified.*

You are correct; the word "outdoor" should have been used. Perhaps a better word would have been "Stadiums".

*On your site, you say, "Leaf blowers have changed in recent years and new designs are no longer noisy." Yet Consumer Reports, in its latest reviews, says virtually all the models it tested exceeded 85 db(A) at ear level. No matter how much you argue that leaf*

*blower operators should be courteous, how do they know when people are within 50 feet? They can't hear!*

First of all, *Consumer Reports* is incorrect. It all depends how the unit is measured. The industry measures leaf blowers at 50 feet and averages 8 different positions. Visualize a microphone on a five-foot high pedestal and an operator with a leaf blower on his back fifty feet away. As the operator runs the blower at full throttle, a measurement is taken every 45 degrees as he make one full rotation while standing in one place. These eight positions are then averaged. Using this method, blowers range in sound level from 74 for a noisy unit to 65 for a quiet one. Every 6 dB(A) reduction in sound level represents a reduction of sound by 50%. Lower it another 6 dB(A) and the remaining 50% is once again reduced by half, or a total of 75%. I talked to *Consumer report* about this test, and the ANSI Standard was not followed during their test.

As far as the statement "No longer noisy", it is relevant. Every blower on the market is quieter than it's predecessor. Only the very large blowers are above 70 dB(A) and they are roughly have as loud as blowers were in 1995.

You are right, operators are wearing ear plugs, but knowing of a bystander is present is a visual issue. He should be looking around at his environment before running the blower. I think this usually is the case. If the person is at fifty feet, there is no concern, for the sound level is no worse than a lawnmower at that distance. Many are even quieter.

*You say of the OPEI manual, "It points out that it is irresponsible to use blowers on loose dirt, gravel drives and dust covered surfaces." Yet I have seen them used in this manner many many times. Unfortunately. I am not fluent in Spanish, so educating most of the folks hired to use them is problematic.*

I agree. It is problematic, but possible.

*If you have any specific numbers or data on emissions, I'd appreciate it. I have stood on my front porch and quite clearly breathed in exhaust from a yard more than 100 feet away. I'd rather that my kids (or I) not be subjected to more pollution than they're already getting. Oh, and in that case, they were using it to clean off a car.*

The numbers you are looking for are available from my web site, but the real issue is that if you see smoke, it is an old blower. As of January 2005 for small blowers and January 2007 for blowers over 50 CC, emissions have been reduced by 90%.

*One last one: from the OPEI manual -- Blowers can be used to "Remove light or fluffy snow [and] dry off pavement." Both of those practices are ridiculously irresponsible uses. Wouldn't a broom easily remove light snow? The second, "dry off pavement," is ludicrous.*

I wouldn't do it, but some people do. My wife's 85-year-old mother cannot shovel snow, but she can hold a leaf blower. She lives in the country and uses it to make a path out to the mail box.

Comment [from Will]:

The State of Arizona is requiring that all leaf blower operators take training every three years. I think this is an excellent requirement. It should go one step further and that is to require that only quiet blowers be used and that they be manufactured after 2005, but their issue is not exhaust or noise, but dust. There are limits to what a leaf blower should be used for and that must be explained to the operator, all operators.

Larry Will