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Blow 'Em Away

Forget raking. The newest leaf blowers are powerful, quiet (well, kind of) and worth the cash. BY CHARLES PASSY

Does any lawn-care implement inspire more controversy and vitriol than the leaf blower? Proponents say it's efficient and saves them from doing backbreaking work. Detractors argue that blowers are noisy and that raking brings satisfaction. To which we say: satisfaction? Maybe, but clearing your lawn in minutes and still being physically able to throw a football around with your kids while your neigh-

bor throws his back out and blisters his hands—that's pretty satisfying too.

Choosing a leaf blower is, in fact, the most strenuous part of the chore. For example, some models are gas-powered and some are electric. Gas blowers require you to keep fuel handy, but they generally deliver more power (and perhaps more noise—more on that in a moment). Electric ones are easy to operate, but with the exception of

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

The heavy-duty Stihl BR 500 leaves other leaf blowers in the dust.

- ▶ It's **extremely powerful**—perfect for large yards with many trees.
- ▶ Despite its strength, it's **surprisingly quiet**. The neighbors didn't complain.
- ▶ The Stihl is **gas-powered**, meaning no extension cords and more mobility.

battery-powered models, you have to remain tethered to a power cord.

Then there's style. If you have a small yard, a handheld will do. Bigger yard and more trees? Consider a powerful backpack blower.

Now, about the noise. Many towns limit the use of blowers because of it, and even if yours doesn't, you'll want to avoid

gripes from neighbors. A wave of new blowers promise to limit the noise without compromising on power, mostly thanks to innovations like widening a section of the blower tube, which acts as a muffler, and adding more insulation around the engine. (If your neighbor still complains, offer to do his lawn. Shouldn't take long.)

The final issue is price. Your average rake costs about as much as a couple of movie tickets. The most expensive home leaf blowers—namely, gas-powered backpack models—can run as much as \$500. But cheaper options, especially electric models, cost as little as \$70. What's the difference? Read on. **\$**

THE TEST I turned my lawn into a testing ground for five blowers: three gas, two electric. To gauge power, I unleashed them not just on foliage but on a stack of bricks. To measure noise, I enlisted—who else?—my neighbors.

TIP For composting or recycling your leaves instead of blowing them into piles on the street, try a blower with a vacuum/mulching option.



Toro Ultra Blower Vac 51598
toro.com
\$86

Black & Decker BV4000 Leaf Hog
blackanddecker.com
\$88

Husqvarna 356BT "Quiet Blower"
husqvarna.com
\$450

John Deere BH25LE Hand-Held Blower
johndeere.com
\$219

Stihl BR 500 Backpack Blower
stihl.com
\$470

POWER SOURCE



NOISE LEVEL (1 = Keeps the peace, 4 = "Turn that %*#@ thing off!")



POWER LEVEL (1 = On the weak side, 4 = Can topple a stack of bricks)



PROS

- ▶ Quietest and lightest (7.3 lbs.) of the bunch
- ▶ Comes with vacuum/mulching attachment (with leaf bag)

- ▶ Not the lightest of those tested, but not bad: 8.1 lbs.
- ▶ Noise isn't excessive
- ▶ Comes with easy vacuum attachment (with leaf bag)

- ▶ Powerful (it had no problem with the bricks) but plenty streamlined too
- ▶ Sleek styling makes it easy to move in tight spots

- ▶ Compact, easy to store and almost as light (9.6 lbs.) as electric models
- ▶ Doesn't require a gas-and-oil mix like some gas models

- ▶ Packs a punch. The bricks didn't stand a chance.
- ▶ Surprisingly quiet for a heavy-duty gas blower

CONS

- ▶ Not very powerful; the bricks barely budged.
- ▶ Difficult to comfortably position leaf bag when vacuuming

- ▶ Not particularly powerful or compact
- ▶ Like many electric models, requires a power cord

- ▶ Say what? Neighbors could barely tolerate the high-pitched whirring
- ▶ Requires that you mix fuel and oil

- ▶ Bad combo: It's both noisy and weak—neighbors complained, and the bricks remained standing.
- ▶ Start-up is cumbersome

- ▶ Backpack models can be bulky and difficult to strap on, and this is no exception.
- ▶ Weighs in at 21.8 lbs.
- ▶ Requires a gas-and-oil mix

BOTTOM LINE

This model proves there's a direct correlation between power and noise: If you want something really quiet, you're going to sacrifice a degree of brawniness. But it's okay for smaller yards.

For small to mid-size yards, this handheld is pretty good—provided you don't mind the cord (you get used to it). It couldn't topple bricks, but it did okay on leaves. Also good for blowing dust from a garage or patio.

If you don't live too close to your neighbors, this might be a better bet than the Stihl. And though it's heavier (at 22.5 lbs.), it actually feels lighter thanks to its back-friendly design. But it sure is loud.

Less powerful than the gas backpacks tested and noisier than the electric, though it can move leaves. Unless you swear by the Deere name, consider one with less noise and more oomph.

For large yards, this is the blower to buy. The design won't win any awards—it reminded one friend of a potato gun—but you're blowing leaves, not making a fashion statement.

B-

B+

B

C

A-