



PLANET
Professional Landcare Network

SafetySense

June 2014

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Editor's note: PASS ON EACH ISSUE OF THIS NEWSLETTER TO EVERYONE WITH SAFETY RESPONSIBILITIES AT YOUR COMPANY.

Operating Leaf Blowers

Key Points

- Leaf blowers are time-saving tools for cleaning leaves, grass clippings, fertilizer granules, and small debris from driveways, sidewalks, parking lots, and other lawn and landscape sites. Leaf blowers have largely replaced brooms, rakes, and water hoses for these tasks, and, according to most landscape industry estimates, cleaning a typical landscape site with a leaf blower is five times faster than using a rake and broom.
- These power tools do, however, pose safety risks that are often overlooked. Leaf blowers can turn rocks, sticks, mulch, grass particles, pieces of glass, and other debris into projectiles that can cause cuts, lacerations, and eye injuries. Operators also are subject to hearing loss, ergonomics-related injuries, and electric shock.
- Common safety-related mistakes include inattention, failure to wear the necessary personal protective equipment (PPE), and using leaf blowers for unintended purposes.

Employers' and Supervisors' Checklist

- ✓ Comply with federal, state, and local regulations. Federal OSHA standards most likely to come into play in relation to leaf blowers are those associated with PPE, particularly hearing, eye, and respiratory protection, and with the General Duty Clause (for ergonomic and repetitive-stress hazards).
- ✓ Ensure employees wear the right clothing and appropriate PPE. For crew members operating leaf blowers, this usually includes pants and long sleeves, hearing protection (ear plugs or earmuffs), goggles or face shields, heavy-duty work gloves, sturdy work boots with nonslip soles and a respirator or dust mask, as appropriate, in dusty conditions.
- ✓ Provide newer, quieter leaf blowers, if possible. One average leaf blower produces 90–100 decibels of sound. Some newer machines are rated at or below 70 decibels at 50 feet and full throttle. **Federal OSHA requires a hearing-protection program for employees when noise exposures equal or exceed an eight-hour, time-weighted average sound level of 85 decibels.**
- ✓ Train crew members to operate the particular leaf-blower models they will be using.
- ✓ Instruct employees to inspect leaf blowers and wires, plugs, and extension cords before each use and bring damage/wear to your attention. Repair or replace damaged tools, wires, or plugs. Tag "DO NOT USE" until the repair can be made or the defective device is disposed of.
- ✓ Create a schedule that allows crew members to take frequent breaks from repetitive-motion tasks and rotate to other duties. Also, have them alternate between chores that require gripping tools with those that don't.
- ✓ Provide backpack-style leaf blowers or equip/buy handheld leaf blowers with shoulder harnesses or straps—and make sure employees use them. These devices are very effective at preventing pulled and strained muscles and muscle fatigue.
- ✓ Make sure electric leaf blowers are plugged into ground-faulted outlets or are used with ground-fault-circuit interrupters.
- ✓ Provide fuel containers with self-closing lids and screen arrestors. These cans have spring-mounted spout caps that automatically open when vapor pressure builds up inside, preventing rupture or explosion. The mechanisms also cause the spout cap to close automatically if filling or pouring is finished or if the can is dropped. A wire-mesh flame arrester prevents flashbacks from reaching the liquid in the can.

Employee Dos and Don'ts

Do:

- Inspect leaf blowers and any wires, plugs, and extension cords before each use and bring damage/wear to your supervisor's attention. Check the condition of the leaf blower muffler and air intakes (clear any debris) and air filter; check and tighten nuts, bolts, and screws and ensure controls, parts, and safety devices are not damaged and are working properly.
- Wear all necessary PPE, which usually includes pants and long sleeves, hearing protection (ear plugs or earmuffs), goggles or a face shield, heavy-duty work gloves, sturdy work boots with nonslip soles, and a respirator or dust mask, if you are working in dusty conditions.
- Clear the work area of bystanders, including other operators, and pets. People and animals should be at least 50 feet away.
- Stop blowing if someone steps inside the 50-foot boundary.
- Wet down dusty areas before using a leaf blower.
- Start with the nozzle close to the ground and then raise it to a height where it does not generate dust.
- Notice what you are moving. Practice moving grass clippings or a paper cup without moving dust.
- Pay attention at all times. Never point the nozzle or blow debris toward people, pets, vehicles, or open windows or doors.
- Use caution while working on steps.
- Remove any loose debris (trash, tree limbs, rocks, etc.) before you start.
- Wear the shoulder harness or strap on hand-held leaf blowers. Adjust the strap to the best fit for you. These devices are designed to take pressure off your back and arm and greatly reduce muscle fatigue and pulled muscles.
- Keep your back straight while operating the leaf blower.
- Use the correct fuel/oil mix. Check the operator's manual for this.
- Refuel before you start the engine. If you must refuel during work, turn off the engine and allow it to cool. Loosen the cap slowly to relieve pressure in the tank.
- Start the leaf blower at least 10 feet from the fueling spot.
- Make sure the spark-plug boot is secure to avoid sparks and possible ignition of fuel vapors.
- Clean the leaf blower and remove debris from the air intakes after each use.

Don't:

- Operate a leaf blower until you have been trained to do so and fully understand the instructions and safety precautions.
- Resist wearing hearing protection. You might not think you need it because hearing loss is gradual and often goes unnoticed.
- Operate a leaf blower if you are tired, sick, have taken medication that impairs alertness or coordination, or have used drugs or alcohol.
- Use an electric leaf blower in a wet area. Do not let extension cords drag through water when using them.
- Modify a leaf blower in a way not authorized by the manufacturer.
- Operate while standing on an unstable surface such as a ladder, rooftop, or in a tree.
- Adjust or service the machine without first shutting it off and unplugging electric models.
- Operate a leaf blower indoors or in a poorly ventilated area.
- Move dusty materials with a leaf blower.
- Use a leaf blower to clean up large amounts of gravel or gravel dust; construction dirt; plaster, cement, or concrete dust; or dry topsoil. Use a vacuum or power broom with water instead.
- Spill fuel when refilling the machine. If you do spill, wipe the leaf blower dry before using it.
- Smoke while handling fuel or operating the machine.
- Leave the blower running when unattended.
- Use a leaf blower to spread or mist fertilizers, chemicals, or other toxic substances.

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