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A-HED

Seasonal Hazard for Working at Home: Leaf Blowers

Workers at home are frazzled by the sounds of the suburbs, with leaf blowers at the top of the noise complaint pile; it's like, 'My neighbor's blowing their lawn, I better go blow my lawn'

By [Valerie Bauerlein](#) and [Jon Kamp](#)

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Millions of American workers last spring thought the silver lining of quarantine would at least be exchanging the hustle and bustle of the office for the relative peace and quiet of home. Then yard work season began.

Software engineer Joris de Gruyter of suburban Seattle made a list of top sayings he hears on video meetings. For every "Sorry, I was muted," there's a "Let me close the windows so you don't hear that leaf blower."

"Where is the Elon Musk electrification when you need it?" said Mr. de Gruyter, of Tesla's quiet battery-powered motor.



Blowin' in the wind

There has been a spike in the number of people at home during prime lawn-care hours, with about 34% of American employees working remotely full time in October, up from 2.5% before the pandemic, according to Nicholas Bloom, a Stanford University economist who studies remote work.

Demand for landscape work climbed, too, as people remade backyards instead of taking vacations, according to landscape industry officials.

Many workers who in pre-pandemic days brushed off loud typists and urban street noise are frazzled by the sounds of the suburbs—Weedwackers, renovation projects, barking

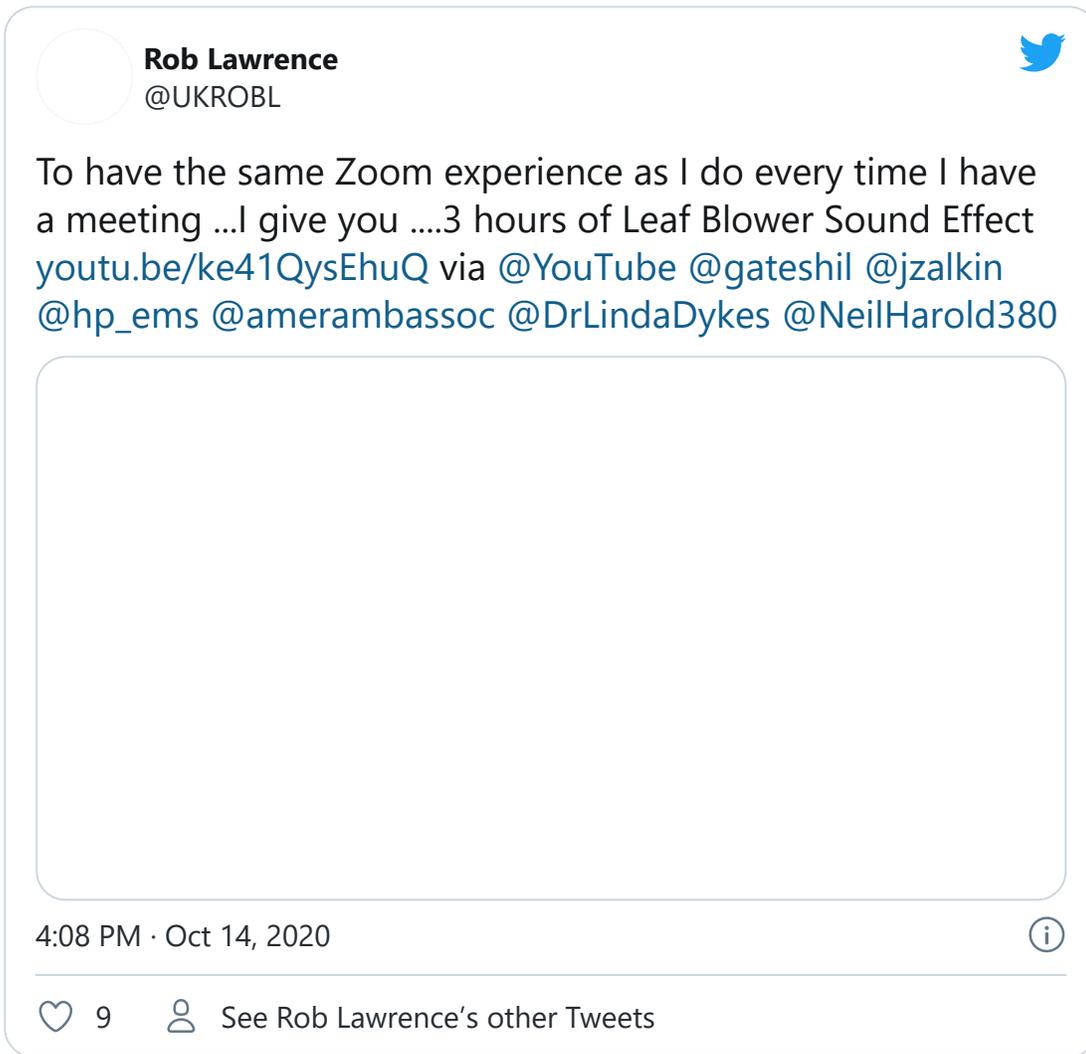
dogs and doorbells.

Leaf blowers, typically powered by small gasoline engines and used to clear lawn clippings and leaves, draw a disproportionate share of complaints. These include gripes on Twitter (“Enough Already!”) and official noise complaints, like in Huntington, N.Y., which has logged at least 75 online leaf blower complaints since March 1, up from 29 a year earlier.

And only now is the country entering peak leaf season, which typically stretches from mid-October to mid-November, according to The Old Farmer’s Almanac.

Flutist and composer Nathalie Joachim said the leaf blowers in her leafy Chicago neighborhood remind her of roosters on her family farm in Haiti, whose cries tend to build on one another. “It’s a chorus,” she said. “Like, ‘My neighbor’s blowing their lawn, I better go blow my lawn.’ ”

Rob Lawrence said he has an aggressive homeowners’ association in his suburban Los Angeles county neighborhood. “It’s almost as if a leaf appears, they will be on scene,” he said. The executive director of the California Ambulance Association shared a three-hour video of leaf-blower noise on social media so his friends could have “the same Zoom experience as I do.”



With homes turning into offices and schools, the noise has amped up the call for restrictions, according to Quiet Communities, a nonprofit group that advocates for reducing pollution and noise.

The township of Montclair, N.J., passed a nonbinding resolution in May urging a halt to leaf blower use during the Covid-19 crisis. Mayor Sean Spiller said the town is exploring more substantial restrictions, such as allowing only quieter, less-polluting electric equipment. A local resident group, Quiet Montclair, is urging gas-blower reforms and steps like mulching clippings and leaves into the lawn.

If you made a list of people wanting to get rid of gas-powered backpack blowers using simple two-stroke engines, landscapers would be first in line, said Bob Mann, who directs state and local government relations for the National Association of Landscape Professionals, a trade group with nearly 100,000 members. “No one’s closer to the noise than the landscape contractor who has the thing strapped on their back,” he said.

Electric blowers have greatly improved and the industry will get there, he said, but it is expensive to sink money into new equipment. And landscapers say using only rakes and brooms would take far longer and be cost prohibitive.

Going electric doesn't solve everything. Matt Gourley , who produces and appears on the “Conan O'Brien Needs a Friend” podcast, has an electric leaf blower that his landscaper uses to tend to his suburban Los Angeles property, where he has been working during the pandemic. He said he tries to schedule yard work around recording times, but the podcast schedule sometimes shifts.

The sound of the leaf blower could be heard as Mr. Gourley started speaking near the top of a recent show, which features Mr. O'Brien and his assistant Sona Movsesian recording from a studio in Hollywood.

“It's like an old man with asthma,” Mr. O'Brien said on the podcast. “You're in Pasadena, where apparently all they do is blow leaves around from one side of the city to the other. It's insane.”

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

What noise drives you crazy as you work from home? Join the conversation below.

Zoom Video Communications, which has 300 million daily participants logging into meetings, up from 10 million before the pandemic, sees the challenge. At last week's Zoomtopia user conference, Chief Product Officer Oded Gal announced artificial-intelligence improvements that “filter out background noise so you can still Zoom while your gardener is mowing the lawn.”

The buzzing of any lawn equipment can wreck a video call, but leaf blowers emit a low-frequency sound that has a long wavelength that passes easily through walls and closed windows, similar to the bass in a car radio.

The way the sound modulates as the leaf-pushing engines are gunned is another irritant, said Catherine Palmer , director of audiology for the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center's integrated health system. While steady droning sounds may fade into the background, humans are wired to notice sudden changes in noise, she said.

This may be useful for evading threats in the wild, but it makes tuning out suburban sounds difficult, she said.

Steve Schale, head of the \$50 million pro-Biden super PAC Unite the Country, is a road warrior who typically is “never home in an even-numbered year.” When the pandemic sequestered him in his suburban Tallahassee, Fla., home, he suddenly understood his wife’s complaints about yard noise interrupting her work.

“My wife used to say to me, ‘I wish our neighbors would all get on the same lawn schedule,’ ” he said. “I never knew what that meant before.”

He has had to seek out quiet spots during calls, including, in one instance, the floor of his wife’s walk-in closet—shoes and clothes visible in the background of his video presentation.



Flutist and composer Nathalie Joachim sometimes wears her studio-monitoring headphones to drown out leaf-blower noise.

PHOTO: NATHALIE JOACHIM

Ms. Joachim, the flutist, said that at one point she and a fellow composer fantasized about fighting back by blasting repeated dissonant major ninth chords on synthesizers over a PA system on their front lawns.

Over time, she said, she has come to appreciate the work-from-home symphony, from the neighbor's cat upstairs to the leaf blowers.

“Winter is going to feel awfully quiet,” she said. “But who knows? Maybe there'll be an uptick in snowblowers.”

Write to Valerie Bauerlein at valerie.bauerlein@wsj.com and Jon Kamp at jon.kamp@wsj.com

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