



Princeton Echo

# Quiet Princeton organization aims to reduce use of leaf blowers

By [Mercerspace](#) on October 4, 2016

**By Robert Hebditch**

In 1978 Phyllis Teitelbaum and Tony Lunn moved to the quiet town of Princeton at an active time in their lives.

After completing their doctorates at Harvard and MIT respectively, they moved when his company transferred him to Bound Brook. Since Phyllis was already commuting from their home in Connecticut to her job as a college administrator at Swarthmore, they needed somewhere to live roughly halfway between their respective workplaces.

Tony worked at Johnson & Johnson as a research director. Phyllis retired after 18 years as a test developer for Educational Testing Service. Retired or not they have been activists with an ongoing commitment to Save the Children and long-term participation in local environmental issues. Tony served on Princeton's Environmental Commission for five years and was chairman for a time. Phyllis involved herself in neighborhood issues and was a member of the Traffic and Transport Commission.

Teitelbaum and Lunn, now both retired, are the driving force behind a group called Quiet Princeton, a grass roots organization dedicated to the reduction of noise from landscaping activities in our fair town, particularly from leaf blowers.

Leaf blowers have been around since the 1970s but, when first used, were not very powerful and notably less noisy. Today it possible to buy quieter blowers, but most routinely generate unbearably loud noise. In our town they have been recorded making noise equivalent to a fighter jet airplane taking off (around 100Db.) "No one would think this reasonable," says Tony.

This sense of what is reasonable is what seems to guide their actions. In late summer of last year, I received an e-mail from a friend inviting me to attend a Princeton Council meeting. Three of us spoke against the current municipal noise statute, which uses a fuzzy and highly subjective standard rather than the precise marker — over 65 decibels—

widely accepted as a reasonable noise level. We hoped, without success, to get the more precise definition into the regulations. The opening section of the ordinance we had hoped to change states “It shall be unlawful for any person to make, continue or cause to be made or continued any loud, continuous or excessive noise or any noise which endangers the health, safety or welfare of the community, or which annoys, disturbs, injures or endangers the comfort, repose, health, peace or safety of others within Princeton.”



There then follows a comprehensive list of 19 noise types from “Horns, whistles, bells and signaling devices” through “Outdoor Concerts.” Both “Blowers, fans or engine” and “Lawnmowers or chain saws” warrant a section of their own. There is some comfort in that their use “between the hours of 10 p.m. and 8 a.m., Mondays through Saturdays, and 10 p.m. and 10 a.m. on Sundays shall not be permitted” except during emergencies.

Yet nowhere does it stipulate an unequivocal means by which noise can be measured. NJDEP’s model ordinance clearly limits noise above 65 decibels at 50 feet or 55 decibels when indoors. Instead, subjective and imprecise terms like “plainly audible, loud, annoying or excessive” are the means by which judgements have to be made. So if a municipal employee comes to investigate a noise complaint he or she may not judge the source of your complaint excessive.

Unknown to us at the time Phyllis and Tony had been working on this issue for many years. They discovered that back in 1997 more than 20 California municipalities had banned blower use outright. Since then dozens more municipalities throughout the nation have put in place some form of blower restrictions. Just last year the New Jersey towns of Montclair and Maplewood passed restrictions on leaf blower use, mostly by limiting the hours and/or times of year they may be used.

Phyllis Teitelbaum and Tony Lunn are lobbying for lower-decibel solutions, and they are building a list of landscapers willing to collect leaves with rakes.

Earlier this year Quiet Princeton held its first meeting at the founders' home on Hawthorne Avenue, close to the high school. We came with a wide range of concerns. One had difficulty with a constantly barking dog, another was disturbed by volume of loud speakers at the high school athletic field. Yet another was appalled by the spreading uses of the leaf blower — cleaning gutters, moving dirt and small debris off sidewalks, cleaning up construction sites.



The group's mission statement reflects a broad concern “to restore and enhance [the town's] peaceful and harmonious character, by removing and controlling sources of noise.” But increasingly activities coalesced around the noise emanating from lawn and leaf clean-up.

“Back in the '90s an effort was made in Princeton to ban leaf blowers outright,” says Tony, “but it failed.” Soon he began to educate himself about the issue and write down his ideas about noise and how to limit it. Phyllis began keeping a file of leaf blower noise complaints, which she found in local newspapers. She kept one letter from a person who professed that she had bought a quiet house, far away in upstate New York, at least in part so that she could escape the constant noise that comes with living in Princeton. An older couple at the first meeting said they were moving out of town for much the same reason. Although the ultimate goal would be to significantly reduce the use of leaf blowers, they proposed to work with landscapers rather than be adversarial. “We seek an alternate way to reduce the noise rather than ban the blowers outright.” In practice they would “encourage both landscapers and customers to voluntarily substitute rakes for leaf blowers.”

We discussed possible stumbling blocks. Landscapers would reasonably expect to charge more for a service that could be expected take a little longer than using blowers. Might customers be reluctant to pay extra? Resistance to change seemed a likely problem too. Many neighbors away from the house during day time may not even be aware of the extent and extremity of the noise.

A plan of action in three stages developed:

1. Ask landscapers to sign up to offer quiet practices to their customer.
2. Create a list of landscapers willing to use quieter practices.

3. Get neighbors to convince their own landscapers to maintain quiet practices, and add them to the list. Phyllis dubbed this “win-win, one-on-one.”

Persuading people to change their habits can be a fraught business. But changing minds and attitudes is what Quiet Princeton expects to do, mostly by approaching landscapers directly and by going door to door speaking with neighbors. “My first approach to a neighbor was less than cooperative,” Tony says euphemistically. He thought it wise to produce a how-to guide for the rest of us. Suggestions included friendly opening gambits and how not to force any issue. Members were ready to try it.

The Quiet Princeton landscapers list began with contacting the 40 or so landscapers already registered with the municipality. Members then called directly and asked if they would be willing to offer “rakes only” leaf clean up. If so, they could be signed up to a list of landscapers participating in Quiet Landscaping — essentially the group’s seal of approval. Surprisingly, some were already offering rakes-only service to their customers. One remarked, “I’ve been in lawn maintenance for 20 years. In the beginning I had a rake and a tarp. I can certainly do the same thing now.”

Initially, Phyllis thought no landscaper would sign on willingly, but through this policy of friendly persuasion, a majority of those called at least showed interest. Eleven signed on almost immediately, with a reasonable expectation of more to come. The list is then passed on to consumers as part of the canvassing effort by members. By talking one on one, members learned that some had already insisted on and received quiet service from their current lawn care providers.

Quiet Princeton acknowledges that completely replacing blowing with raking may not be possible in the short term, but in their own quarter acre yard, the couple practice what they preach. They divide their leaf disposal between raking leaves to the curb, dumping them, along with food scraps, on their compost heap and allowing leaves to stay on the flower beds and vegetable patches. An electric mulching mower takes care of leaves not too thickly spread on the lawn.

“A mulching mower is a great alternative since it crunches dead leaves to tiny fragments, allowing them to stay in place and fertilize the lawn,” says Tony. One could argue that mowers are as noisy as blowers and thus defeat the tenets of the group. But cutting the grass and disposing of the leaves at the same time produces a net reduction in total noise. “Cutting grass is not a task than can easily be completed without a mower,” Phyllis observes. “Mowers are necessary, blowers are not.”

Blowing the driveway, if there is no danger of slipping, is not necessary. Let un-mulched leaves stay on flower beds, a natural fertilizer doing its work for a lovely spring. Be aware that the street is not a kitchen and does not need to be spotless. It’s common to see men with blowers chasing a few leaves or bits of grass down the street, making an unnecessary racket, raising dust, and adding particulates to the already overloaded air. Notably so, on Nassau Street where merchants routinely use them to clean their frontage. How about broom cleaning for such small stuff? “I don’t have a broom,” said one lawn

worker to Phyllis' direct request to use one. "He can buy a \$250 blower and gas it up but can't afford a \$10 broom?" Tony asks.

Going forward Quiet Princeton hopes to raise awareness, expand membership, and reduce noise. But if leaf blowers went away entirely members would be happy.

"Particularly important is to encourage people to be more active, to talk directly to their neighbors, one on one, and convince them of the benefits of a quiet life. A beautiful street is a quiet street," says Tony.

To be part of eliminating unnecessary noise, contact [quietprinceton@verizon.net](mailto:quietprinceton@verizon.net)