

# Garden tools shouldn't pollute

May 9, 2003 - It's spring, and that means Canadians are finally able to spend more time outdoors, in our parks and our gardens. In past years at this time, I've warned readers about the indiscriminate use of herbicides and pesticides. Today, it's heartening to see municipalities across the country, and the entire province of Quebec, taking steps to reduce the unnecessary cosmetic use of pesticides. But many people don't realize that other activities are also complicit in making our gardens sources of pollution and toxins, rather than health and recreation.

The biggest problem is the lawn mower - specifically, the standard, two-stroke gasoline lawn mower. Most Canadian homes have such a machine. They are cheap, convenient and the engines last forever. But they are also a serious source of air pollution.

When I mention this problem to some people, they scoff. How could a mower with such a little engine be a problem? They don't even burn that much gasoline! The problem is, they burn both gasoline and oil, and they do so very inefficiently. In fact, using a standard gas mower for one hour emits the same amount of common air pollutants as driving a car for almost 600 kilometres! And these days lawn mowers aren't the only noisy culprits. Weed trimmers, lawn edgers and those things I hate the most - leaf blowers - have become staples in many Canadian garages.

All these machines together create a cacophony of noise and pollution. Added up, they are responsible for about five per cent of Canada's urban smog. In addition, homeowners and gardeners spill small amounts of gasoline and oil onto the ground during each fill. Because of their frequency, these spills really add up, contributing to both ground and surface-water pollution.

The most frustrating thing about this problem is that it is so unnecessary. Much like the indiscriminate use of pesticides, many homeowners continue to purchase and use inefficient, gas-powered tools out of habit or ignorance. Of course they don't want their children breathing air filled with toxic particulate matter, but it never occurred to them that this is what happens when they mow the lawn with a standard mower.

At one time, there weren't many options to the two-stroke engine. Today, there is a tremendous variety of low or zero-emission garden tools on the market. Electric lawn mowers are suitable for most lawns, and rechargeable electric mowers offer the convenience of being cordless. Leaf blowers, lawn edgers and weed trimmers are also all available with electric motors. True, the electricity needed to run these machines is often produced by burning fossil fuels at a power plant, but that is much more efficient

than running thousands of little gasoline engines. Even modern four-stroke gasoline mowers are far less polluting than their two-stroke cousins.

Push mowers may seem old-fashioned, but they are making a comeback. Modern push mowers are engineered to cut grass easily, without too much effort. They are quiet, emission free and a good way to get exercise. In addition, they cut the grass into smaller pieces, which can be left on the lawn to decompose and slowly release nitrogen back into the soil, eliminating the need for chemical fertilizers.

Canadians are re-assessing their lawns. Since the 1950s, a big, carefully manicured lawn has been regarded by many as a sign of success and prosperity. Unfortunately, lawns suck up a disproportionate amount of water and fertilizer, and the trend of keeping them completely weed free necessitated the use of chemical herbicides. In our obsession with uniformity and perfection, we created the equivalent of parking lots - large, empty spaces virtually devoid of life.

That's changing as Canadians become more aware of the problems associated with lawns and lawn tools. Some are choosing to replace all or part of their lawns with drought-resistant, low-maintenance alternatives. Others are simply grabbing a push mower, breathing the fresh air and enjoying the peace and quiet.

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