

## BLOWBACK

*The great suburban leaf war.*

BY TAD FRIEND

Peter and Susan Kendall's house, in Orinda, California, is off a hilltop lane called Via Hermosa, or "Beautiful Way." Nearby streets reinforce the Arcadian theme: Dias Dorados ("Golden Days"), Linda Vista ("Beautiful View"), and El Sereno ("The Serene"). Orinda, a bedroom community of nineteen thousand people eight miles northeast

To them, Orinda's pastoral glories—its pristine gardens, best admired over a glass of Cava—are achieved at a Faustian price. That price is health, happiness, and the ability to hear yourself think. The Devil's instrument is the leaf blower: almost every homeowner employs a rickety blower to manicure his yard and "hardscapes" (driveway, patio,



*Depending on whom you ask, leaf blowers are vital garden equipment or a noisy menace.*

of Oakland, is canopied by oaks and sycamores and marbled with orchards and hen coops. Its public schools excel, its citizens sparkle in conversation (a third of them have advanced degrees), and its ranch houses sell for an average of \$1.3 million, nearly triple the price in surrounding Contra Costa County. Steven Glazer, a member of the Orinda City Council, declares, "It's the greatest small town in America."

The Kendalls think it's all a crock.

and deck), often by blowing debris into his neighbors' yards, which must then be blown, in turn. The result is death metal *sur l'herbe*.

One recent Friday afternoon, Peter Kendall, who has the graying hair and the precise locution of an anchorman, took me onto his deck, two hundred feet above Lake Cascade, and levelled a finger at blowers operated by local gardening services. There they were: down the street, over the way, across the lake and

into the trees—aural kudzu, advancing everywhere. Kendall has a decibel meter and a laser range finder, and can pinpoint a blower a thousand feet away. "Our topography permits one blower to trespass into hundreds of homes, and Fridays and Saturdays here are a non-stop leaf-blower symphony," he said. "You can't tune it out!" A lawnmower can be just as loud, but its frequency—the wavelength that distinguishes a squeak from a rumble—remains fairly constant, and soon becomes background noise. Because a blower's pitch oscillates constantly, the machines, as one manufacturer's manual admits, "can be as difficult to ignore as a crying baby."

"My blood pressure is up just listening," Susan Kendall said. The family's dachshunds, Freddie and Fritz, barked mournfully.

Peter continued, "And then we try to enjoy a salad from our organic garden, and it's covered with a fine dust thrown up by these two-hundred-plus-mile-an-hour bazookas—a biohazard buffet of diesel soot, brake-lining particles, fungi, mold, spores, and animal fecal matter."

The Kendalls, who are both fifty-three, have lived in Orinda since 1994, and they brought up two children here. Peter has sleep apnea, which made him so groggy that, in 2006, he retired from his job as a bond trader. At home, he began to notice how noisy the neighborhood had become, and how his asthma flared whenever he biked through blower-created dust clouds. (Susan, who works part time as a registered nurse, also suffers from asthma attacks.)

Last fall, Peter and Susan published a letter in three local papers suggesting that the city ban blowers and that everyone return to using rakes and brooms. Energized by the support they got, the couple spent four thousand dollars building a Web site for their cause, which they called Quiet Orinda, and making a short documentary about the menace. This summer, they set up a regular table outside the Saturday farmers' market to gather signatures for a blower-ban petition. The idea, Peter said, was "to increase the sense of guilt in town about blowers, so it's like the way you feel driving a gas-guzzling S.U.V. in Marin"—the strenuously green county to the west. Orinda

seemed poised to become the twenty-fourth city in California to ban gas or gas-and-electric leaf blowers.

But beneath Orinda's loamy topsoil lies a flinty bedrock of disputation. Scott Zeller, an emergency-room psychiatrist who is running for a council seat, told me that the blower question "is seemingly small—but people are virulent, almost foaming at the mouth, on both sides." Henry Pinney, whose two-acre property houses fifty oaks, is a leading voice of libertarian opposition. He told me that, without a blower, maintaining his yard would take hours each week instead of fifteen minutes, and went on to term the Kendalls' proposal "fascist," and to suggest that Peter Kendall "get double-glazed windows and draw his drapes and just stay inside."

In Orinda, as in much of coastal and near-coastal California, gardens and trees do the representational work that lawns do elsewhere: they enhance your property by extending your living space and by advertising your ability to bring nature to heel. Any challenge to a property's routine maintenance thus becomes a threat to self-worth, net worth, and an entire way of life. So a lot of people here will give up their leaf blowers only when you pry them from their cold, dead hands (or, more precisely, from their Hispanic gardeners' cold, dead hands). During a chat in his back yard about blower noise, Thomas McCormick, a councilman who serves as the city's mayor, spread his arms and shrugged, invoking the ambient clamor from his golden retriever, his Maine coon cat, his Holland Lop rabbits, his Rhode Island Red and Americana chickens, and his four children. "Hey, I feel for the guy, but we all have issues," he said. "My kids don't always hit the toilet."

Leaf blowers originated in Japan, in the nineteen-sixties, as a tool for dispersing pesticides onto fields and fruit trees. Then someone took off the chemical cannister and improvised a tool for mustering garden debris. Blowers were hailed as an environmental boon: when Los Angeles was suffering from a water shortage in 1976 and 1977, the city instructed municipal workers to use them, rather than the traditional thumb stream from a hose, to clean sidewalks and driveways.

Of course, the blowers, which hadn't been designed for residential use, were extremely noisy. Opponents saw them as the latest manifestation of what the cultural critic Leo Marx identified as "the Machine in the Garden": the engine of supposed progress—whether it's the steamboat that smashes Huck Finn's raft or the all-conquering locomotive—that challenges a more dulcet way of life. The small city of Carmel was the first to ban blowers, in 1975, and opposition built along the California coast, a region that enjoys taking an axe to life styles that are thriving elsewhere. (The great majority of the cities that have banned blowers are in California, and the ones that aren't, like Aspen, Colorado, might as well be.) But the politics of the issue were peculiar, allying conservatives with illegal immigrants and pitting limousine liberals against their own employees. In Los Angeles, the struggle culminated, in 1998, with the actors Peter Graves and Julie Newmar—television's Catwoman—vilifying the instruments before the City Council; Newmar referred to blowers as "a three-foot extension of a gardener's masculinity." Ten Hispanic gardeners responded to the proposed ban with a weeklong hunger strike in front of City Hall.

The ban in Los Angeles galvanized the blower industry to join gardeners' and landscapers' groups in lobbying for a state law that would override such local measures, but the California senate shrewdly temporized by ordering up a study of the dangers posed by blowers, a sixty-eight-page document that concluded that more research was needed. After that, whenever the issue arose locally the industry was quick to respond with a blanket apology and a blizzard of exculpatory statistics.

The industry's defense was often delivered by the folksy consultant Larry Will, a retired engineer who helped develop the first "quiet" blower for Echo, one of the largest blower manufacturers. Will told me, "The older blowers were, in fact, irritating. They squealed. They were just bad." But he said that the industry, by redesigning the impeller paddles, reducing vibration in the cooling fins, and eliminating the "piston slap" of the old, clunky, two-stroke engines, had made "as much as a seventy-five-per-cent reduction in

sound compared to fifteen years ago." And Kris Kiser, the executive vice-president of the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute, the industry's trade association, argues that the introduction of four-stroke engines has helped make new blowers "ninety-per-cent cleaner than their pre-1997 rival." There's little incentive to do more. James McNew, who oversees technology issues for the O.P.E.I., observes that "the quieter blowers are harder to sell, because they're perceived as not powerful." The state-of-the-art Stihl BR-500 costs four hundred and sixty-nine dollars. The 550—a similar model, without noise-reduction technology—is nearly twice as noisy; it's also forty dollars cheaper, half a pound lighter, and thirty-three-per-cent more powerful. Gardeners almost never need all that horsepower, but the noise has come to symbolize their, well, masculinity.

City councils, buffaloes by competing claims, often accede to the industry's suggested compromise: a measure that mildly restricts hours of use. Larry Will directs lawmakers to a model regulation he's drawn up that also requires homeowners and contractors to buy the cleaner, quieter blowers made after 2005—which Echo and other manufacturers are naturally willing to provide. The industry will produce 2.4 million gas blowers this year, nearly seventy per cent more than in 1998.

One afternoon in late July, the Kendalls convened thirteen activists and experts from around the state on their deck for a "No Blow" summit and barbecue. Standing at a picnic table on the deck, Peter Kendall began by noting that although they had science on their side, as well as simple decency, a lot of people were treating *them* as the noisy scourge. "Quiet Orinda has definitely stalled recently," Kendall acknowledged. "If I had to do anything differently, I wouldn't use the word 'ban,' which really upsets people. But ninety per cent of these efforts stall or fail. So how do we regain momentum?"

He introduced Diane Wolfberg, a mainstay of Zero Air Pollution Los Angeles, the group that led the drive to that city's ban: the movement's apogee. Wolfberg said, "The reason these efforts stall is that we're David, fighting the

## SOLITAIRE

The flip, flip, flip of card on tabletop,  
The flat hiss of the cards her hands were sliding  
From column to column as the columns grew

And shrank, and shrank and grew, by suit and sequence,  
Her face unsmiling, fixed in its staring down  
At the unsmiling faces of the queen,

The king, the jack that stared back up at her  
From the wrong column or the wrong order,  
The royal family broken apart and scattered,

Unable without her help to reunite.  
That's why she played for hours, sometimes all night,  
To prove to them how much they need her, how

There'd be no family till she got it right.  
Would it kill them, for once, to thank her for this devotion,  
The slid cards hissing, the flip, flip, flip,

While down the hall that wasn't a hall at all  
But a rope bridge over a gorge in the antipodes  
I huddled before the snowy screen where Ralph,

The Honeymooner, shook his fist and said,  
One of these days, Alice, one of these days—  
Bang! Zoom! To the moon! And people laughed.

—Alan Shapiro

Goliath not just of local gardeners but of Echo and Stihl." She added, "I would try to get the law classified not under noise but under health and safety, because you can't enforce a decibel-level law—you just can't." Since 2004, Orinda has had a noise ordinance that, among its other provisions, restricts the use of leaf blowers and other outdoor power tools to weekdays between 8 A.M. and 6 P.M. and Saturdays between ten and five. The rule is often flouted, but in six years the city hasn't issued one blower citation. Kevin Mooney, an Orinda police officer, explained, "We get an average of two complaints every Sunday, usually anonymous. We go to the location, turn the car off, listen for blowers. Drive up the canyon, turn the car off, listen. Half an hour later, and very often we're still on the wrong street and the gardener is long gone."

Because noise is elusive and evanescent, health has become a vital sec-

ond front in the blower wars. Kendall next introduced Dr. David Lighthall, a health-science adviser to an air-quality agency in California's Central Valley. Lighthall declared, "We have here a perfect storm of regulatory failure. Because the latest research shows that the respirable road dust that the blowers kick up into the air—where it can remain for days—is a toxic mix of endotoxins, mold, and organic carbon compounds." He went on, "Leaf blowing is not private conduct, because when you kick up dust you extend risk beyond your property line to your neighbors."

Jeff Segall, an Orindan whose two young daughters often can't nap on Fridays because of blower noise, interjected, "It's an aggressive and obnoxious purification ritual. You're getting rid of all the waste on your property and sending it over to your neighbors."

Maya McBride, another Orindan,

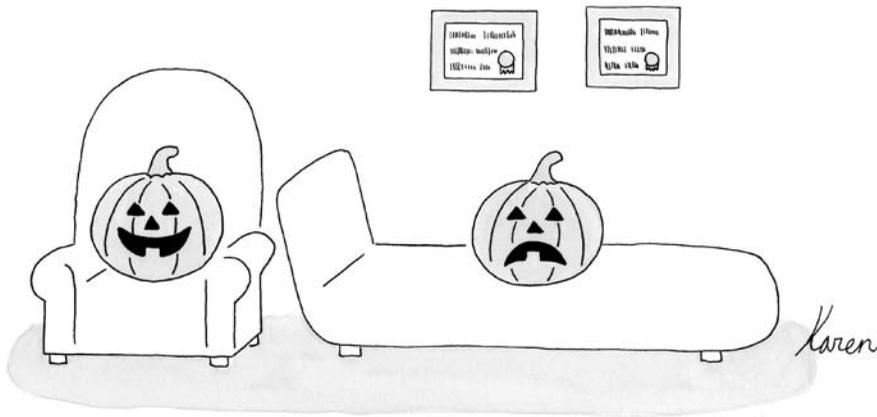
said, "My home is going to be in *Better Homes and Gardens* in a few months. I'd like to point that out to the libertarians—hey, I just spent a million dollars on my property, and, because of your leaf blowers, I can't use it on the weekends. My husband gets so annoyed he runs out to the fence and blasts our electric leaf blower at the neighbors, and then I have to go unplug Dan." She added, "Now the other soccer moms turn away when they see me coming. They spend extra on organic milk and organic fruit, but they want a clean deck, God damn it."

After Susan Kendall urged everyone to go pick up a hamburger and some potato salad, the conversation on the Kendalls' deck turned back to noise. Dr. Michael Kron, a Berkeley psychiatrist who had been canvassing studies on noise, addressed the problem's demographic valence. "Because we're not living in Oakland ducking the next hail of bullets, there's this idea that we're just some fat-ass fussy busses, rich white people in the suburbs, worrying about a little noise," he said. "But noise is very powerful. We've used Britney Spears songs on Guantánamo Bay prisoners."

The actual noisiness of blowers is a vexed issue. The average new blower is rated at about sixty-nine decibels, only as noisy as a loud conversation. But that official rating is determined by measurements made fifty feet away in an open field. Those operating the blowers are subjected to considerably more noise, as are neighbors who live in cramped or reverberant terrain; Kendall had just clocked the Stihl BR 500, which is rated at sixty-five decibels, at ninety-eight decibels up close—nearly ten times as loud. Kron continued, "Children exposed to these noise bombs, it's a disaster: impaired concentration, impaired sleep, inability to learn to read and speak. Children in loud, loud places like East Oakland are the ones who grow up saying, 'Can I ax you a question?'"

In the silence, a single blower could be heard in the valley. Peter Kendall asked, "What do you do when someone says, 'The noise doesn't bother me?'" There has to be a pollutant argument."

David Lighthall said, "The particulate matter that blowers throw up—coarse, fine, and, especially, ultrafine,



where you're below .1 micron—is really bad stuff.” Scientific measurements of this threat are just beginning to emerge; in late August, the California Air Resources Board reported that fine particles in the air result in nine thousand premature deaths a year in California. Lighthall went on, “If we lowered the standard on fine particulate matter below the federal standard, we could prevent seven hundred premature deaths a year just in the Bay Area.”

“Give me an example of the ultrafine nanoparticles,” Kendall said, taking notes.

“We’re breathing nanoparticles coming off your barbecue right now,” Lighthall said. “They’re absorbed into the brain from your nasal cavity.”

“Oh, that’s a good example!” McBride said. “Everyone barbecues.” The others considered their burgers gloomily.

The blower battle is particularly intense here because Orindans are proud of their city’s vaunted “semirural” character, and like to see themselves as homesteaders. If pressed, they may acknowledge that terrain bisected by a ten-lane highway—State Route 24—and featuring two Starbucks and a Peets may not demand the grit of a Laura Ingalls Wilder. If further pressed, they may acknowledge that the area’s boskiness is largely the result of city planning. The stands of live oaks, valley oaks, pines, redwoods, and mulberries are all as artificial as Lake Cascade, which was created in the nineteenth century to irrigate the local golf course. The trees in this former grassland arrived with the houses, and kept on arriving.

Orinda’s tree-planting ordinance—basically, every time you fell a large native tree you must plant at least six more—has created so much shade that many home-

owners’ solar-power panels have become useless. What’s more, the ordinance favors strew catkins and acorns, and are arguably too much tree for the city’s small yards. But the legislative goal of shade is all but demanded by California’s self-image as the golden state; life must take place out of doors. The writer and landscape designer Wade Graham, in his forthcoming history of the garden, “American Eden,” observes that “the postwar California garden didn’t just offer the ‘outdoor room’ of the Mediterranean-inspired gardens of the previous fifty years, but true outdoor living: a lawn for leisure, a barbecue for cooking, a patio for eating, drinking, and playing, a pool for the sheer delight of it. . . . No agriculture, no seasons, no work, really: the new garden was all about play.”

Yet these playgrounds require continual upkeep. One recent morning at eight o’clock, Greg Deaner, the head of a gardening crew, began his weekly maintenance of a half-acre property on Orinda’s Hillcrest Drive. He donned his Echo PB-500T backpack blower and earmuffs and blew off the driveway, corralling the leaves into a mound for his two colleagues to collect. He blew off the chaise longue by the pool, the hot-tub area, and the patio, then walked behind a bed of trees and shrubs footed in bark mulch and began blowing out ornamental-plum and arbutus leaves. After eight minutes of blowing the bed, he had a pile of debris that weighed about twelve ounces. He looked up: “Kinda boring, ain’t it?”

I asked why the leaves couldn’t be allowed to form a natural compost. “A lot of people, older people particularly, just want to sit on their patio and see their garden as clean as you would see in a maga-

zine,” Deaner replied. “Clean enough to eat off of. In the fall, all you’re doing is blowing leaves. It makes you crazy—you go home and dream of leaves.”

“Could you use a rake and broom?” I asked. “You’re pretty funny,” Deaner said. “You can’t use a rake and broom on bark mulch—we’d be here five hours, and who would pay for that?” Deaner’s three-man crew, hired out by a landscape designer named Steve Lambert, costs \$127.50 an hour. Yet Lambert says that he doesn’t make much on maintenance, and would simply retire his crews in the event of a ban. “So you’d lose jobs,” he said. “Or, if we switched to rakes and brooms to help our existing customers, I’d have to hire more crews to get all the extra work done—which means more trucks on the road, which means more pollution.” He grinned, seeming not displeased to be complicating the issue.

Blower advocates like to point out how much time (and therefore money) the machines save. But opponents note that tests conducted by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power showed that a grandmother using a rake and broom took only twenty per cent longer to clean a test plot than a gardener with a blower. Blowers are indeed superior on bark mulch—but one reason that bark mulch has become so ubiquitous is that it can be cleaned so easily with a blower. “The blower is a godsend—it’s sliced bread,” an Orinda-based landscape contractor named BlueJay Feldman told me. “It’s also an answer to a problem that it helped to create”—by enabling the suburbanite’s competitive push toward larger lawns and more complex gardens.

The blower also makes visible—that is, audible—a vibrant underground economy of workers employed by those who can’t afford Greg Deaner: the “mow, blow, and go” gardeners who keep this ecosystem on life support. There are ten thousand licensed landscaping contractors in California, but at least as many crews of Mexican immigrants who will give your property a weekly once-over for between forty and sixty bucks. I watched a crew of two men, who, like most of their fellow-workers, lacked earmuffs and dust masks, blow the roof, the driveway, and the street frontage of one Orinda house in twelve minutes, depositing the debris under a neighbor’s maple. Before Peter Kendall began tending his

own yard, in 2008, the Kendalls used a Hispanic gardener, whose name they remember as Manuel. When they asked him to switch to a rake and broom, he did, for a few months, and then he disappeared. Many Orindans worry that if they raise the topic of leaf blowers with their time-pressed gardeners—whom they already worry about exploiting—they risk coming across as domineering or, worse, losing the gardener entirely.

Easier, then, to simply carry on, knowing that when you come home from work every leaf will have been magically roused from its resting place. Alex Hernandez, a Salvadoran immigrant who has fifteen gardening clients in Orinda, says, “When you really hear the blowers is four to six in the afternoon. If you start blowing in the morning, and it’s windy, at the end of the day it looks like you haven’t done your job.”

Early on Labor Day morning, Susan Kendall was in her car when she saw a pajama-clad neighbor, Lark Hilliard, in a vocal dispute with another neighbor’s gardener. After Hilliard pointed out that it was illegal to blow on a holiday, the gardener called her a “crazy lady,” and said, “I have to earn a living, I’m not a rich lady like you.” Kendall pulled over and got out her Flip camera to videotape the encounter, and the gardener advanced on her, with his blower roaring, saying, “Get the police, I want to hear this from them!” By the time the police arrived, however, he had thought better of his position and peeled off in his truck. So Kendall joined her new ally for coffee and a hot popover. Hilliard asked, “What’s wrong with my neighbors? Why is the only thing they care about that they don’t have to pay more?”

Somehow the blower issue became a referendum on what it means to be a neighbor: whether neighbors constitute a community or are just nuisances and Nosey Parkers. Local papers and Web sites burst into flame wars. Sally Hogarty, the editor of the *Orinda News*, said that two-thirds of the two dozen letters she’s received on the topic have taken the Kendalls’ part, but she added, “People who’ve been here a while think they should maybe find something else to do with their time.” A correspondent named David Kirk mentioned that his neighborhood was home to a “woofing dog”

and two “yapping dogs,” as well as a resident who operated an incredibly noisy wood planer—but he said that neighbors should discuss such matters privately. Both sides sarcastically suggested cutting down all the city’s trees in the name of efficiency.

There seemed to be no back fence over which to find an accommodation. Lawrence Burde, a retired engineering technician who supports the Kendalls, says that because he really likes his neighbors he hasn’t discussed their noisy blowers with them. Instead, when he went to the Safeway and saw a contractor blowing out the parking lot well after the 6 P.M. deadline, he yelled at him.

What stung the Kendalls was the ad-hominem attacks. After the *Contra Costa Times* ran an article about the Kendalls’ campaign, commenters on the paper’s Web site remarked, variously, “If you don’t like it, then move”; “I bet he has not done a solid day of work with his hands”; and, darkly, that only one place is truly quiet “and it is unfortunately a coffin.” Peter Kendall said, “The caricature is that we’re some privileged upper-crust couple eating Brie on our deck and imposing our will on those below. I’m two generations away from immigrants from Eastern Europe who fixed shoes! We’re not super-green enviro-Nazis. We’re big fans of the internal-combustion engine.” Susan even owns an S.U.V. “All we object to is the leaf blower!”

For months, the Kendalls met every denunciation graciously. To counter those who scorned rakes and brooms, Peter began conducting demonstrations, at the farmers’ market and at local hardware stores, of his new Amazing Rake (a combination rake and scoop) and Haaga sweeper. The Haaga is shaped like a Toro push mower, but the “motor” is a wheel-driven system of brushes that gather leaves and debris and can even sweep up a Coke can. Kendall became part Ralph Nader, part Rachel Carson, part ShamWow! guy. But, late this summer, fed up, he succumbed to the provocations and wrote a public letter feigning surrender to his interlocutors’ arguments: “In Orinda, if leaf blower noise drives you crazy, just take comfort in the fact that your neighbors are saving themselves time and money, and remind yourself to ‘just deal with it!’ After all, it’s only a problem six days a week, right?” Sally Hogarty, at the Orinda

*News*, declined to publish it, telling me, “I love satire, but, oh, my God, it would cause problems.”

If the suburbs are, as Lewis Mumford suggested, “a collective effort to live a private life,” then the subconscious—as revealed in the idiosyncratic dispositions of one’s garden—becomes subject to majority rule. But the majority seems undecided about whether to treat leaf blowing as a crime or just a pain in the ass. Palo Alto, which banned gas blowers in 2005, appointed a blower-compliance officer, who handed out some three hundred and fifty tickets a year. However, as a 2006 city report noted, “Some residents were using the ordinance to deal with other issues.” In one case, the investigating officer determined “that the alleged violator did not have a gardener, did not own a leaf blower, and that there were some other unresolved neighbor issues.” So the city decided to require calls from three different people before it would pursue a violation—a sort of power-tool variation on Sharia law. Then, earlier this year, the cash-strapped city made the issue nearly moot by eliminating the compliance officer’s position.

Gardeners in Berkeley and Piedmont, which both forbid blowers, say you can blow there with impunity. “The cops will wag a finger, but that’s it,” one told me. And in Los Angeles—a city of four million people, where you can hear leaf blowers at every hour of the day—there have been occasional arrests for blower use in some neighborhoods, but the police department’s official number of citations issued is exactly zero.

The Kendalls still hope to enact a ban that Orinda could then ignore. They’ve secured a spot on the City Council’s agenda in mid-November to testify about the noxious effects of blowers and to urge that the council formally study the issue. Meanwhile, Larry Will, who has been tracking their campaign, is preparing to send the council members one of his comprehensive letters explaining why bans don’t work.

The Kendalls would need the votes of three of the council’s five members to implement a ban. For the moment, they don’t have them. Councilman Glazer told me, “It seems like a slippery slope—what would be next? Someone mad about a chainsaw? Restrictions on cars driving on the road?” Mayor Thomas McCormick simply sighed: one more life-style tangle to resolve. “So far,” he said, “this just isn’t blowing over.” ♦