

Take a leaf out of the eco book

Sydney Morning Herald January 10, 2011

A LOT of people have got it in for leaf blowers because of the noise they make. Beats me why they stop at leaf blowers. The whole array of garden maintenance machines, such as lawnmowers, edgers, whipper-snippers and hedge trimmers can all be accused of destroying the serenity of the domestic idyll. And don't get me started on outdoor vacuum cleaners!

But to indict leaf blowers et al on the grounds of their noisiness is to completely miss the elephant in the yard. Never mind the noise, what about the fuel they use? Just imagine how many barrels of oil are burnt across the country, let alone the world, every week in the name of garden neatness. It would have to be one hell of a lot.

If we're ever going to get serious about global warming, one of the things we will have to address is the amount of fossil fuel energy we happily chew through in the name of outdoor tidiness and neighbourly respectability.

Grass grooming chews up the most juice. Once you put in a lawn you have to keep cutting it. It goes with the territory.

Ergo, we have to find other, lawnless ways to keep our front and backyards looking neat if our grandkids are not going to end up in a puff of mower exhaust. We're going to have to exercise our ingenuity to come up with other ways to utilise outdoor space.

If you live in a high-rise or have no garden for some reason, you can feel environmentally self-righteous, since these remarks apply to the suburban domestic context. (Suburbia: where they bulldoze all the trees and name the streets after them).

One of the first things that springs to mind is to replace some of the grass with a vegie garden, or a chook run, but that would probably prove to be too labour-intensive for a lot of soft-handed urban dwellers. A Japanese-style garden with large areas of raked pebbles wouldn't be much trouble to keep looking schmick - as long as don't they invent a motorised rake - but it wouldn't be much fun for kids to play in. Probably best of all would be a low-maintenance native garden with paths wandering through it, but the largely unexamined assumptions of most householders as to what a "proper" garden should be like would make this idea unthinkable for most.

Going on our performance so far in confronting our carbon footprint in practical ways, we'll probably just go on as we are, and muddle through till extinction - but at least we'll have neat lawns.

Scythes, anyone?

Bill Bottomley