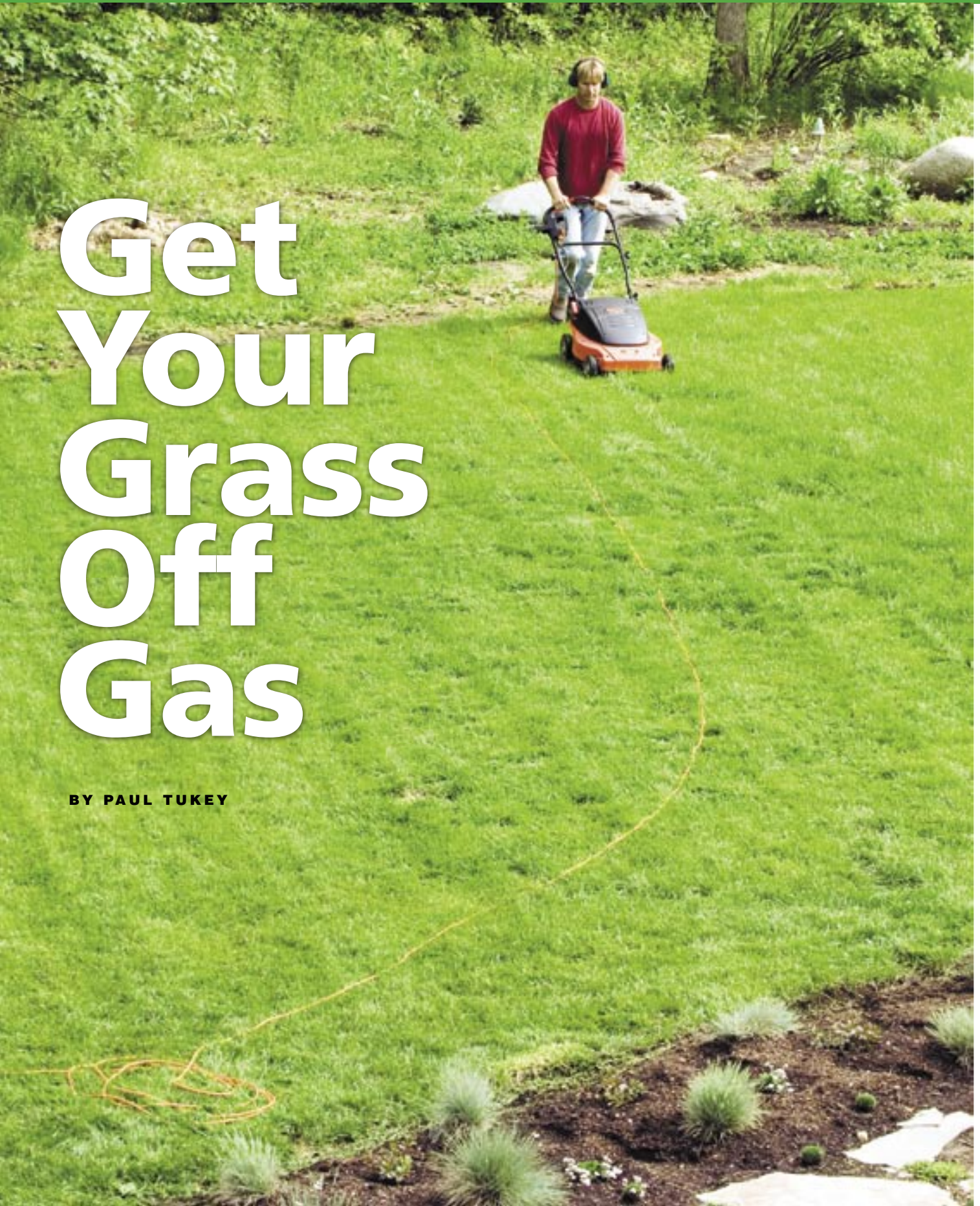


A new campaign by SafeLawns encourages electric and reel mowers

Get Your Grass Off Gas

BY PAUL TUKEY



I'll never forget my first encounter with a small engine back on the dairy farm in Bradford, Maine in the mid-1960s. Not more than 4 or 5 years old, I begged my teenage uncle to let me drive his go-cart that he cobbled together by using the engine off an old lawn mower. Joy quickly turned to fear, however, as I barreled brakeless down the road — chased by my screaming father on foot — and crashed into an embankment perilously close to the farm pond.

Having lived to tell the story, I learned to love the awesome potential of small gas engines for both financial gain and sheer fun. I was one of those teenage boys who pulled a simple Briggs & Stratton mower and a can of fuel around the neighborhood in search of \$5 paychecks, and our family always entertained itself with mopeds, snowmobiles and motorboats.

In some circles, it's sacrilege to suggest that we should stop using these engines, but we need to do it — now. Beginning at the New England Spring Flower Show, SafeLawns.org will kick off a campaign titled "Get Your Grass Off Gas" that we'll be spreading across America. Why? Small gasoline engines, the ones associated with lawn mowers, weed whackers and hedge trimmers, are some of the worst offenders in terms of air pollution and so-called greenhouse gases that warm the atmosphere.

"It is sad to think we need to tell people this," said actor and director Ben Affleck, a native of Cambridge, Mass. "I love gas engines, the whole speed thing. But if we want to save this planet, we need to start looking at new habits (and) new message points, and we need to begin to break the tradition of thoughtless reliance on the internal combustion engine."

The context of our conversation was a discussion of one of Affleck's latest projects titled "Clean My Ride," a video on YouTube that features Affleck dressed as an ear of corn. His message is that we need to stop burning so much petroleum and that "flex fuels" such as

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ethanol are a better deal for consumers and the planet. Ethanol, created from corn, may not be a good environmental answer considering all of the resources it takes to grow something we could otherwise eat.

When it comes to lawns and gardens, though, we have two undeniably better environmental alternatives: push reel mowers and electric lawn and garden tools. Before you harrumph the idea of trading in your gas mower and two-stroke trimmer, understand that today's electric and reel mowers are not your grandfather's models. The reel mowers, constructed of lightweight metals and heavy-duty plastics, are easy to push and require no fuel. Electric mowers and trimmers now come with more powerful batteries that allow them to go virtually anywhere and do any lawn and garden job that required a gas machine in the past.

Actor and director Ben Affleck makes a push for alternate fuels with "Clean My Ride," a video on YouTube.



GET YOUR GRASS OFF GAS

Check out these findings from Vermont's Agency of Natural Resources (parentheses added):

■ “Gasoline-powered lawn mowers produce hydrocarbons (found to be a major component of smog), particulate matter (which damages respiratory systems), carbon monoxide (a poisonous gas) and carbon dioxide (a greenhouse gas that contributes to global warming).”

■ “Cordless electric lawn mowers emit 3,300 times less hydrocarbons, 5,000 times less carbon monoxide (CO), and less than half the carbon dioxide per hour of operation than gasoline engine mowers.”

The alternative is here: It's time to get your grass off gas. It has a nice ring to it, don't you think? Come check out our exhibit at the flower show, or visit www.SafeLawns.org for more information.

Pros & Cons of Electric Lawn Mowers

PROS

■ **They're environmentally friendly** — If your lawn is a half-acre or less and you want to contribute to the “green” wave that is sweeping the nation, few other purchases can rival an electric lawn mower for tangible, measurable benefit. Electric mowers don't burn gas, so they don't produce CO₂ or VOC (volatile organic compound) emissions. You also have no fuel spills. If you recycle your mower battery at the end of its life span, you'll have reduced your carbon footprint astronomically. Electric mowers that use extension cords are even better.

■ **They're quieter** — Electric mowers are, on average, about 50 percent quieter than their gasoline counterparts. It's still a good idea to wear hearing protection, even though the noise emitted by electric mowers is usually less than 85 decibels — the level at which temporary or permanent hearing loss can occur, according to the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders.

■ **They always start** — For many people, this is benefit No. 1: no more pulling of a starter cord. If the power cord is plugged in or the battery is charged, your mower will ALWAYS start.

■ **Lower operating costs** — Mowing a 10,000-square-foot lawn 20 times a year with an electric mower uses less than \$5 of electricity. If you use a gas-powered mower, the cost is \$50 to \$75 — plus the required oil changes or, in some cases, the two-stroke oil required to be mixed with the gas.

■ **They're lightweight** — Electric mowers are about 30 percent lighter than gasoline models.

■ **Engine power** — Battery-powered electric mowers now come in 24-volt models, giving them power comparable to a four-horsepower engine. Corded mowers can generally mow anything a five-horsepower mower can cut through.

■ **Mulching** — Most electric mowers on the market today come with a mulching blade, which is better for the lawn and soil. As the grass is cut into fine pieces and “mulched” back into the lawn, nutrients are returned to the soil — minimizing the need for fertilizer applications.

CONS

■ **Power cords** — Dealing with a cord that is 100 or 200 feet long can be a hassle. To minimize the struggle, keep the excess cord coiled between the outlet and the mower, and mow back and forth in straight lines by starting closest to the outlet and working outward. Never mow in a circular pattern — the cord manipulation will drive you crazy.

■ **Battery life** — On cordless models, the battery makes the mower as convenient to use as a gas model, but the charge time is limited. Plan on about 45 minutes of full-power operation on a single charge. Keeping a spare battery around may be a good idea for larger lawns. At the end of the battery's life, be sure to take it to a recycling center rather than adding it to a landfill.

■ **No self-propulsion** — Most electric mowers must be pushed by the user because a self-propelled function would eat up too much battery life. Since electric mowers are generally lighter, they are usually easy to maneuver.

■ **Wet grass** — Mowing a wet lawn is never a good idea because it's bad for the health of the grass. The mower also labors more, which drains the battery and reduces engine life. Water and electricity don't mix, either.

■ **Initial cost** — A high-quality cordless electric walk-behind mower, from manufacturers such as Black & Decker or Neuton, will generally run about \$400, which is more than the average gasoline walk-behind.

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