

HOME-GARDEN

Gardening Central Mass.: Making the switch to electric landscaping equipment

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Although I do most of my gardening with hand tools, I do have a need for power tools at times. I love that so many battery-powered options are now on the market. In my experience, these tools are just as powerful as gas-powered models, but they are much better for the climate, generally require less maintenance and reduce noise and air pollution that harm our health. I've seen the benefits both at home and at New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill, where our horticulture team demonstrates that electric equipment can be effective even when caring for large properties. There are a few things to keep in mind when making the switch to electric equipment.

Stick with one product line

Many companies now offer high-quality electric equipment that rivals their original gas-powered tools. STIHL, Husqvarna, Makita and EGO are a few brands that have both homeowner and professional-grade electric tools. I recommend choosing one brand and sticking with it. This is mostly because the batteries tend to be expensive and you will want to be able to swap batteries between tools. Even if you only have one battery-powered hand tool, I recommend having a backup battery or two depending on how large your gardening projects are. Keep in mind that inspecting batteries after each use is important as damaged batteries can cause fire. Manufacturers provide guidance on how to inspect and store batteries to prevent overheating and prolong battery life. It's always a good idea to reference guidelines specific to the tools you're using.

Consider comfort

Electric tools are easier on your body. While not silent, they are far quieter than gas-powered gardening tools, reducing the risk of damaging your hearing. It is recommended that you still

wear hearing protection. Electric tools are also often more lightweight than gas-powered tools and they vibrate less. Ergonomic comfort is also important. Things to think about are the weight of the tool, the fit to your body type and the size of the handles. Choosing tools that have soft but firm handles, nonslip grips and weatherproof materials will allow you to use the tool most comfortably. Go to a retailer and try out equipment from a few different brands rather than buying online.

Choose tools with multiple functions

My personal favorite is a multitool from STIHL — the KombiSystem. This is a handheld power tool that has a dozen attachments available. I own the string trimmer, mini-cultivator and bed redefiner attachments and often find myself using all three during a day of gardening. Another favorite is a STIHL battery-powered garden pruner. This is essentially a little chainsaw with a 4-inch bar. It has no problem cutting through a good-sized limb, but it is small enough to fit into tight spaces and it is very lightweight.

Transition over time

Making the switch to electric is an investment and it might be daunting to think of switching over all of your equipment at once. I have been slowly changing mine over as my gas-powered tools reach the end of their lifespan and as my budget allows. There are state and local incentives and rebates that can help. MassSave offers incentives from partnering retailers and rebates for lawn mowers, leaf blowers, string trimmers and chainsaws. If you aren't eligible for Mass Save, check with your town as they might have their own local rebates available to residents. Beyond considering these practical things, making the switch to electric equipment has a positive impact on the world around you. Here in the U.S., 40 million acres of land is lawn. My own small yard in Worcester is part of this number. Research shows that landscaping with gas-powered equipment, especially tools with two-stroke engines like leaf blowers, contributes significant amounts of harmful emissions to the atmosphere. These potent greenhouse gases are bad for people and the climate. At the same time, being outside, digging in the dirt, caring for our lawns and gardens, all these activities have positive health associations, and they can be done in ways that are ecologically beneficial, too. It's all about choosing practices and technologies, like electric equipment, that can make a positive difference.

Gardening Central Mass. is written by New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill CEO Grace Elton and other Garden experts. Located on 200 acres in Boylston, New England Botanic Garden creates experiences with plants that inspire people and improve the world. Learn more at www.nebg.org. The column is published on the third Sunday of the month.

