

MIETRO

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BY ROBERT A. REEDER—THE WASHINGTON POST

Jeff Gates is fully armed to do battle on his front lawn in Wheaton, a one-man affair Gates refers to as his "Blowing Leaf Festival."

Let the Ground Wars Begin

Yard Troops Engage in Pitched—and Losing—Battle Against Leaves

By DARRAGH JOHNSON
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The leaves keep dropping—the golds, the reds, the burnished cinnamons. They have so completely buried Jeff Gates's front lawn in Wheaton that when the morning paper is delivered, he can't find it. His front walk is submerged. His front steps are concealed.

"I hate this season," he fumes.

In the autumnal struggle of Man vs. Leaf, he is losing. Big time. Each leaf on his half-acre property may weigh the same as a Post-it note, but en masse, they possess the sheer tonnage of several baby elephants. They may be beautiful on the trees—a multi-hued palette—but on the ground, they guarantee hours of backbreaking work.

"Hell," asserts one of Gates's anti-leaf allies, Rockville resident Tim McDonough,

"would be raking leaves through eternity."

Joining their war cry are legions of others. From the overwhelmed amateurs of Washington's suburbs to the crack team at the White House, men and women are whipping out their weapons of choice: 24- and 30-inch tines, electric vacuums and gas blowers, blower-vacs, blower-vac-shredders, blower-vac-shredder-chippers and the blower-vac-shredder-chipper-mulcher-bagger.

They are massing piles of leaves, mounds of leaves, monuments of leaves.

It's hefty duty. In Fairfax County, the typical homeowner wrestles on average with 1,000 pounds of leaves a year, says public works honcho Randel Hancock. In Montgomery County, so many leaves must be bagged and vacuumed that 350 public works employ-

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BY DAVID TOASE—PHOTODISC

In Area Yards, the Autumnal Battle of the Leaves Is Joined

LEAVES, From B1

ees spend 10-hour days, six days a week, for six to eight weeks, collecting 40,000 tons of tree detritus piled at the edge of homeowners' properties.

The season starts with the vamped Ash, eager to disrobe, and doesn't end until the mighty Oaks let go.

"You pay for the view," groans Gates, whose property boasts 35 full-grown tulip poplars. Each drops 25 pounds of leaves. Which means that, once again, it's time for what he calls his annual "Blowing Leaf Festival," a festival that no one shows up for except Gates himself.

"It's like herding cattle," says the 53-year-old Web guru, who works for the Smithsonian Institution. He spends weekends during leaf season firing up his red-bodied Toro Leaf Blower, Model 850, with the long black hose. He outfits himself in a dust mask, ball cap, protective eyewear and industry-approved green ear covers. Finally prepped for battle, he cries, "I am ready to face my fate and the elements!"

Legend has it that Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom and warfare, invented the rake—and since then, it has evolved into a tool for the farmer and a tormentor of the weekend yard warrior.

Romantics and pastoralists call raking "the highest form of yard work." But it's perhaps no coincidence that this ubiquitous garden tool was invented by the goddess of war.

These days, raked leaves have spawned lawsuits: A recent blowup in Prince George's County started with 17 leaf piles dumped on a homeowner's front yard and ended with his neighbor's final threat, "I've picked up the



Jeff Gates and Peter Burgan, left, differ in their weapons of choice: Gates prefers a powerful leaf blower; Burgan, a plastic rake and riding tractor.

leaves, you [expletive], and now the fun is really going to begin."

Raked leaves have spawned bonfires: About 12 cars go up in flames each year in Montgomery County, after people park on a leaf pile and the still-hot catalytic converter ignites it. "Most people don't know that can happen," says county Department of Public Works engineer Lew Cutsail, "until they look out the window, and their car is burning up."

And now that the rake's distant cousin is in the pic-

ture—that stentorian, hurricane-force leaf blower—entire cities are divided into pro-blowers and pro-rakers, with Urban Noise Task Forces studying the issue and rancorous town councils trying to regulate the blowers. Twenty California cities, including Los Angeles, Berkeley and Santa Monica, have banned blowers or severely restricted their use.

Plenty of people prefer rakes anyway, probably because they are less expensive. At Home Depot, the \$7.99 tines outsell the \$30 to

\$300 leaf blowers 4 to 1.

Some people, of course, will pay whatever it takes to get rid of leaves without lifting a finger themselves.

Yet no matter who does the collecting, eventually the leaves get sent far away. Montgomery County shuttles its piles to a plant in Dickerson, where they get composted, then sold at Home Depot, where homeowners buy them to fertilize still more trees, which ensures still more leaves falling to the ground.

"That works," Cutsail says. "Keeps us in the job,

don't it?"

Even at the White House, America's Raker in Chief—the ideally named Michael Lawn—spends the months from October to January battling the droppings of 300 trees on 18 acres. On the worst days, he and his army of eight devote themselves to three official leaf-clearings: at 6 a.m., at lunchtime and again in the late afternoon.

"There are leaves absolutely everywhere," he says by phone on a rare break from the garden. But he can't talk for long. He's gotta blow—

more leaves.

Gates and his neighbor, Peter Burgan, survey the deep pile carpet of leaves from the edge of Gates's yard, which overlooks the stately trunks and lacy branches of Wheaton Regional Park.

Burgan, 41, fights this battle with his plastic rake—a "\$20 deluxe" model that he supplements with his riding tractor mower.

Gates envies Burgan's tractor—"he never offers to share"—but he sniffs at the rake. It's green. It's puny. "And it gives you blisters," he says.

Jerry Herron would find their conversation not only revealing, but infinitely understandable. The American studies professor at Detroit's Wayne State University dubs bringing in the leaves a "highly significant phenomenon"—particularly since the advent of the leaf blower.

"It allows men to buy expensive and noisy equipment," he notes, "and then demonstrate their prowess in front of the whole neighborhood."

Lawn mowing can't compare: "Everybody does that," he says.

And snow blowing is a waste: "The weather is too cold to allow much audience admiration."

Gates heartily concurs. He hoists his Toro and shouts, "I've got the phallic power thing! I mean, look at this thing. Is this power, or what?"

But there won't be any leaf blowing on this recent Saturday. Rain and wet leaves "like cement" have temporarily vanquished him.

Gates turns to go inside. But he'll be back. In the ongoing war of Man vs. Leaf, he will cede no ground to the enemy.

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