NEWS

"But now I only soak up wine."
I DRINK WINE ADELE

Yale halts use of gas leaf blowers near HQ but not elsewhere

BY NAUSICAA CHU
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER



NAUSICAA CHU / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER
Following complaints from an Assyriology professor, Yale said it would switch to battery-powered leaf blowers near the Humanities Quadrangle. The University still uses gas-powered leaf blowers elsewhere on campus, despite years of pledges to replace them.

Yale plans to replace gas-powered leaf blowers used near the Humanities Quadrangle with electric leaf blowers.

Director of Facilities Operations Steven Gilsdorf shared the change around the York Street building, which is home to 15 humanities departments, in an October email to Assyriology professor Benjamin Foster GRD '74 '75 that was reviewed by the News.

The shift follows the News' reporting on concerns raised by Yale faculty regarding gas-powered leaf blowers and years of pledges from Yale to transition its landscape equipment to electric machinery. But elsewhere on campus, Yale workers appear to use gas-powered leaf blowers at high noise levels and, according to two current and former Yale doctors, without proper safety protection.

"Yale has already transitioned a significant portion of its grounds maintenance equipment to electric power across central and medical campuses and the athletics fields," Ronnie Rysz, a spokesperson for Yale Facilities, wrote in a statement to the News. "Approximately 70% of the equipment currently being used in these areas, including blowers, trimmers, edgers, and push mowers, is electric."

Rysz added that the conversion "is ongoing and is part of Yale's broader efforts to decarbonize campus operations." In his email to Foster, Gilsdorf wrote that "The overall plan will be to transition the remainder of the Grounds department to electric/battery equipment to meet the Sustainability goals of the university."

Foster wrote in an email to the News that while Yale had switched to electric leaf blowers near HQ, he had observed gas-powered leaf blowers used in other parts of campus.

Yale has planned to replace its gas-powered machinery with electric alternatives for nearly a decade.

A 2017 Yale Sustainability article, which included an interview with Dev Hawley, Yale's director for University Planning and Facilities Operations at the time, stated that Yale "decided on replacing half of the backpack blower supply with electric alternatives to test their performance this fall." The article noted that Hawley expected the remaining equipment to be replaced the following year.

Five years later, a 2022 Yale Sustainability article titled "Leading the Charge: Yale Shifts to Cleaner, Greener Landscape Equipment" said it "used to be that maintaining green spaces meant disrupting them," including with "the blast of a leaf blower," but "No more." It added that Yale's Central Downtown Campus had "nearly completed its conversion" to electric machinery and was a "successful test case" for battery-powered equipment.

As of November 2026, Yale still appears to use gas-powered leaf blowers.

"There are many factors that have an impact on the speed of conversion, including a growing campus, aligning operational needs with advancing technology, and the expansion and creation of battery-charging infrastructure to support a growing array of zero-emission equipment," Rysz wrote.

For this story, the News recorded leaf blower noise levels with a TopTes TS-501B sound level meter, which measures noise levels with an accuracy of 1.5 decibels, according to its product description. Measurements were taken within approximately five feet of the leaf blowers.

On Wednesday, the News observed two workers using gas-powered backpack leaf blowers to clear leaves near Silliman College. The leaf blowers reached 93.8 dBA, which is above the level "at which sustained exposure may result in hearing loss," according to a Yale Environmental Health and Safety decibel level comparison chart. The leaf blowers also created a visible cloud of dust.

The workers appeared to be wearing cloth masks. But cloth masks are not sufficient protection against small particulate matter produced by leaf blowers, according to Karen Jubanyik MED '94, an associate professor of emergency medicine at the Yale School of Medicine.

"If an employee is being told they have to use a gas-powered leaf blower, I would recommend an N95-type mask," Jubanyik said in a phone interview. "Those will be better than cloth for sure."

Shirley McCarthy, a professor emerita of radiology and biomedical imaging at the Yale School of Medicine, wrote in a text message to the News that cloth masks do not adequately protect workers.

On Wednesday, the News also observed a worker using a gas-powered leaf blower without a mask near Sterling Memorial Library. The leaf blower had a noise level of 78.1 decibels, two decibels below the Yale Environmental Health and Safety threshold for potential hearing damage.

Some gas-powered leaf blowers at Yale are designed to operate at lower noise levels. At separate campus locations, the News observed three STIHL BR 500 leaf blowers, a gas-powered leaf blower with a noise level of 65 decibels, according to the model's product description.

Yale also appears to use battery-powered leaf blowers in places other than HQ. On Monday, the News observed a worker using a battery-powered leaf blower on Old Campus with a measured noise level of 55.4 decibels, and on Tuesday, the News measured a battery-powered leaf blower used near Branford College to be 59.3 decibels. Battery-powered leaf blowers tend to be quieter and safer than gas-powered leaf blowers, according to Vincent Giordano, a retired environmental lawyer and advocate for leaf blower restrictions in Connecticut.

Opponents of gas-powered leaf blowers, including several Yale doctors, have sought their restriction in Connecticut for years.

In 2025, Connecticut legislators proposed a bill that would eventually prohibit the use of hand-held or backpack gas-powered leaf blowers in the state. Yale doctors, including McCarthy, internal medicine professor Naftali Kaminski and anesthesiology professor Jessica Feinleib, submitted public hearing testimony supporting its passage. The bill "completely fizzled," Feinleib said in a phone interview, and did not make it to a full vote.

In 2026, another proposed ban on gas-powered leaf blowers was stripped from a Connecticut State Senate bill.

Giordano said in a phone interview that restriction proponents hope to work with the Connecticut legislature in the 2027 session to put forth another "all-carrots bill" to provide economic help to those who want to use less polluting tools.

The STIHL BR 500 leaf blower costs $559.99, according to its listing on Ace Hardware.

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Microsoft outage hits Yale, where faculty and staff use Outlook

BY SARA AGRAWAL
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Shortly after 12:41 p.m. on Thursday, computer science professor Michael Fischer's inbox stopped receiving emails. When emails had still not shown up when he came home from work later that evening, Fischer, who studies cryptographic security, started checking websites that track Microsoft customer complaints. He found reports of outages from across the country.

Beginning on Thursday afternoon, an outage hit several Microsoft platforms, including the email service Outlook. In an X post, Downdetector, a website that collects consumer reports of outages, said 74 countries had reported outages that afternoon.

The Yale email accounts of faculty and staff operate through Outlook. While all students have access to Microsoft 365 accounts, students from a selection of schools — including Yale Law School, the Yale School of Management and the Yale School of Medicine — use Outlook as their primary email service. Yale College students use EliApps, Yale's Google service, for their email.

Fischer said in a phone interview that it was clear to him on Thursday that Microsoft did not know the problem, adding that "these kinds of health problems are very difficult to diagnose." Fischer compared finding a problem in a system as big as Microsoft's to finding a disease in the human body.

"The human body is very complicated, and not completely understood, and nobody can really look at a person, and know everything that's going on inside their body," Fischer said. "Same way with the internet."

On Friday morning, Yale's Information Technology Services sent an email to the Yale community, saying that "Microsoft Outlook email service experienced an interruption" starting Thursday afternoon and that "Microsoft email services are starting to resume to normal operation."

Fischer said that on Friday morning, his email was "operating in a degraded mode" and was back to normal by the afternoon.

Vice President of Technology and Campus Services John Barden wrote in a statement to the News through Yale spokesperson Tina Posterli that Microsoft Teams was also affected beginning Thursday afternoon but was restored by Friday afternoon.

Fan Zhang, a computer science professor and, like Fischer, a member of Yale's Applied Cryptography Laboratory, wrote in a Sunday email to the News that he was personally affected by the outage. He wrote that he was "working on a submission deadline" with some students and that they "urgently" needed to ask a question by email about a submission rule. One student, whose email was still functioning, was eventually able to send the email.

Microsoft issued two apologies through their X account on Friday morning.

"This was a technical issue not related to cyber or AI / agents," the later post read. "The incident was introduced by an issue during an earlier network capacity upgrade that surfaced following a recent network change. We have addressed the underlying issue and continue to restore service to remaining customers and regions."

Fischer described two possible causes of the global outage. He said that "the description of some older router suddenly experiencing more traffic than normal" matches the description of a Distributed Denial-of-Service attack, a kind of cyberattack. He also said another possible cause of the outage was that "the system was operating near capacity, and some components just failed."

Last week's outage was indicative of larger problems, Fischer said.

"All of our systems are insecure," he said. "The internet and cloud computing have gotten so complicated and so pervasive and there are so many vulnerabilities that what we have are these large systems that we all depend on that are fragile."

Zhang wrote that "Email protocol is designed to be decentralized and resilient." However, he wrote that "running email has been a major hassle nowadays" and that "relying on major providers like google or outlook avoid these pitfalls and have many benefits, such as better spam control and faster response to security incidents."

Zhang added that it would be beneficial to have access to backup systems.

"For the survival of our democracy and for world order and civil society generally, I think we have to decentralize," Fischer said.

Jaime Teevan '98, a member of Yale's board of trustees, is the chief scientist at Microsoft.

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LUKE HUH / PHOTOGRAPHY EDITOR
Outlook, Microsoft's email platform, started malfunctioning across the globe on Thursday afternoon. While Yale College students are on Google's email platform, all Yale faculty and staff, as well as students in some graduate schools, use Outlook.