

Just a Dash Will Do

Deicing salts applied to your driveway and walkway may save yourself from neck or tailbone injuries this winter, but they can spell disaster for your landscape plants, vehicles and nearby lakes and streams. Much of the salt flows with melted water into freshwater streams. In addition, excessive salt application can affect plant stems, buds and roots of trees. For these reasons, it is important to apply salts only when necessary and in the appropriate manner.

The most common deicing agent used in Michigan is a compound called sodium chloride. Sodium chloride causes severe decline in plant and tree health. Salt runoff can wash into the soil, thus increasing salt levels. As a result, the root systems grow weak, which reduces the ability of foliage to fight disease. Salt that is applied near your home can enter streams directly from the road or from surrounding melting snow (runoff). Salt can cause stratification in our waterways, a process where a salt-heavy bottom layer of water prevents the healthy mixing of layers. A sudden or extreme change in salinity (or “saltiness”) can be harmful to aquatic life as well. Aquatic organisms require a certain amount of salt in the water. If the amount of salt is too great it will affect an organism’s ability to regulate the amount of fluids in and out of its cells.

You can reduce pollution of local streams, lakes and landscape vegetation by selecting the proper materials and methods for removing ice and snow.

- Ice melting products are most effective when spread thinly and evenly over the pavement prior to ice formation. It is much easier to prevent ice than to try and melt a thick layer of ice.
- Use alternatives, such as clean cat litter or sawdust to help improve traction on ice (sand is NOT recommended for residential use).
- If possible, use less salt than is recommended by the manufacturer.
- Add a small amount of water with the deicer to help initiate melting.
- Protect your plants with burlap or durable plastic screens to shield them from traffic splash.
- Try using more salt-tolerable plants. Check with your local landscaper to find out what is best suitable for your needs.