

Ice-melt Damage

The Saturday after Christmas, I had quite a time shoveling my driveway. When I was finished, my driveway still had many slippery patches of ice and compacted snow. When considering how to get rid of these spots, I decided an ice-melt product was probably my best option. Ice melt, usually composed of different salts, reduces the temperature at which water melts. But even though ice melt does get rid of ice, it can cause later problems including damage to turf, landscape plants, pavement and the environment in general. In fact, in the spring, it is common to see dead turf and damaged landscape plants along park strips and driveways where snow tainted with salt has been pushed. In most instances, though, damaged turf will recover within a few months. Trees and shrubs usually require more time to recuperate. When salt damage occurs, dead branches should be pruned out. For further information on pruning, see http://extension.usu.edu/files/publications/publication/NR_FF_004.pdf.

Cat facing, a condition caused by salt damage, can occur on cement and concrete. As water dries away from the pavement, salts penetrate the cement surface and expand. This breaks up the cement.

Excessive ice melt can run off into natural water sources including groundwater, streams and ponds. This can degrade the water quality and kill fish and other organisms.

Indoor surfaces can also be damaged as ice melt is tracked into buildings. This can hurt the finish on hardwood floors and can also be a nuisance to remove from carpet.

To reduce the possibility of damage to both the landscape and cement, avoid over-applying ice-melt products. Varying the type of ice melt used may also be helpful. During sunny weather, applying dark colored products such as activated charcoal or dark colored, organic palletized fertilizers can work well as the dark color absorbs the sun's heat and causes the snow to melt. These products are mostly available from vendors that carry a wide variety of horticultural products. Another option may be an application of sand. It can be hard to find this time of year, but it can improve traction on ice and it does not damage plants or pavement. For further information on ice-melt products see: <http://extension.usu.edu/files/publications/publication/HG-511.pdf>.

Another snow-related problem that may be apparent once snow melts is a turf disease called snow mold. This was especially a problem in the spring of 2008 and is often worse in shady areas and where snow has been piled. If possible, push snow into sunny locations that are not directly over turf. This is not always possible, and if snow mold becomes present, its damage can be ugly, but turf quickly recovers. Products such as activated charcoal and dark tinted fertilizers can cause snow to melt more quickly and may help reduce the amount of damage.

As a reminder, applications are being accepted for the upcoming Master Gardener Course. For more information see: <http://extension.usu.edu/cache/htm/horticulture>.

~ Contributions to this article were made by USU horticulture intern, Liz Braithwaite.