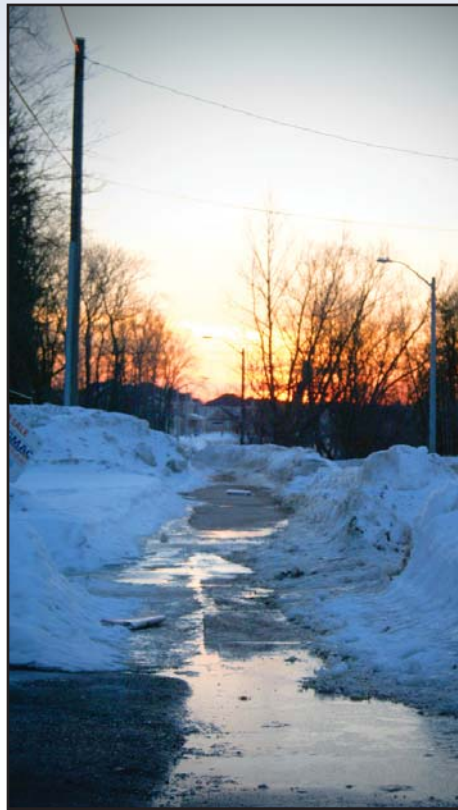


The Hazards of Melting Snow

Every once in a while, the thermometer will hit 45° in March, and although I know the warm weather is here only temporarily, I can't help but think of gardening, bike rides in the country and picnics outside. Although March is often the snowiest month of the year, it also marks the official start to spring. I myself have somewhat of a love-hate relationship with the month of March. On the one hand, it brings the possibility of a few warm days, red-winged black birds returning to the marsh across the road and tulips lifting their leaves out of the soil. On the other, melting snow means muddy streets and soggy yards. I love the snow when it is falling, but I sure hate the mess it creates when it melts.

March is the time of year when I look at the house and think, "Gee, I sure let things go to pot!" A Tupperware container lies on its side at the top of the driveway, only recently thawed from a thick patch of ice. The top tier of my bird fountain leans at a precarious angle, and that little red flag on our mailbox is permanently frozen halfway between up and down. For now I can ignore the disrepair, blaming it on the cold and the lack of sunlight, but eventually as the ice continues to melt, I will have to spend a few days returning the yard to a state of normality.

Unfortunately, the spring melt can wreak as much havoc on our local lakes and rivers as it does in our yards. That dirty snow that has



Dirty snow that has sat, accumulating car exhaust, salt, sand and litter for the past three months will melt and carry all of its dirt and muck with it down the street and into our local waterways.

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The sheer volume of stormwater created by melting snow can often

overwhelm local drainage systems. In a natural system, deep-rooted plants and tree roots absorb the melting snow. Sometimes the water collects in pockets in the land, creating vernal (seasonal) pools that act as breeding grounds for frogs, salamanders and insects such as dragonflies and damselflies. In our modern society, however, driveways, houses and roads often disrupt these natural systems. These hard surfaces cannot absorb the stormwater and instead channel it to storm drains, culverts and local ponds. The result, too often, is flooding, stream bank erosion and dirty water.

We can limit the harmful impacts of spring snow melt by creating cities and neighborhoods that function more like natural systems. One solution is to build narrower roads and shorter driveways to reduce the amount of impervious surfaces. Another is to increase the ability of your yard to absorb water by aerating your lawn, planting trees and deep-rooted plants, and building raingardens. A mature tree canopy will capture 1 600 gallons of water per year, while a 100 sq. ft. raingarden will absorb another 9000 gallons. To learn more about landscaping your yard for clean water visit www.BlueThumb.org or www.cleanwatermn.org.

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