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Winter road salt damage preventable

By Emily Dalnodar

Cars, lawns and shoes are all susceptible to the havoc road salt can wreak, but some experts say preventative measures can help reduce the damage.

In 1996, Americans used 20.1 million tons of road salt, said Andy Briscoe, director of public policy in the Salt Institute. The Salt Institute is a trade association that represents about 30 international producers of salt.

Road salt is sodium chloride, which melts snow even when temperatures are in the low 20s.

Sometimes potassium chloride or magnesium chloride is used instead of road salt, but they cost more money and can cause more environmental damage, according to studies by the Michigan Department of Transportation.

So far this season, the University has spent \$4,000 on 100 tons of salt, which has not all been used, said Chuck Thour, senior buyer for the University's Facilities Management. Last year, the University spent \$30,000 for 1,000 tons of salt, he said.

Road salt can damage plants, trees and grasses by getting into the roots through the ground or splashing directly onto the foliage. The grass bordering sidewalks at the University usually needs replanting each spring, partly because of salt damage, said Les Potts, acting manager of the University's Facilities Support.

Instead of using salt on sidewalks and driveways, people should use damp sand mixed with some calcium chloride, said Beth Jarvis, interim horticulturist in the University's Extension Service.

This could decrease the amount of damage to yard plants, she said.

But if road salt has contact with plants, watering the affected areas in the spring will flush out and dilute the salt before the plants dry out, Jarvis said. She said it's also helpful to

choose vegetation that is resistant to salt damage, such as shrubs like Alpine Currant or trees like Fragrant Sumac.

"Road salt is kind of a frustrating situation for everyone," said Mark Mohaupt, owner of Terry's Autobody in Minneapolis. He said vehicle owners have several ways to prevent salt corrosion.

"Going into the season with protection, such as wax, helps," Mohaupt said. The smoother a vehicle's surface, the more likely foreign substances will just slide off, he said.

Keeping vehicles as clean as possible helps too, Mohaupt said. After a big snow melt, he said it's a good idea to get a car wash.

When the snow season is completely over, a vehicle should get a thorough power wash to remove any elements from the underbelly, according to the Salt Institute. This costs around \$25, but will save money on vehicle repairs in the long run, according to the Institute.

Car manufacturers offer rust-proofing as well. Most cars today only have 1 percent rust corrosion after six years, said Briscoe of the Salt Institute, compared with 90 percent in the 1970s.

"We're pretty excited about what's going on in the auto industry in the last 10 to 20 years," Briscoe said.

But for students who don't have cars to get themselves to class, their shoes end up taking the bulk of the damage. Road salt can cause white lines on shoes, which are especially noticeable on leather.

"We have a salt remover, a chemical treatment to dissolve salt," said Jim Pickard, otherwise known as Eddie, who owns Fast Eddie's Shoe Repair in Dinkytown.

One homemade way to remove salt from shoes, Pickard said, is to rub a mixture of one part white vinegar and one part water onto them. It's important to rub the solution onto the shoes before they dry, he said.

When the salt gets into the leather, it is wet with water. Once the water dissolves, the salt turns into a crystalline form consisting of several sharp granules. The salt then cuts into the fibers of the leather, creating the puffy white lines on shoes.

Once the damage is done, there will always be a trace of the line, said Pickard, who suggested people keep the mixture of vinegar and water by their doors to remind them to scrub their shoes.

Shiny leather shoes should also occasionally get a fresh coat of wax to prevent damage, Pickard said.

It's also important to clean the salt off before waxing the shoes, he said. While waxing may look like it cleans the salt off, the lines will slowly creep back into view, Pickard said.