Winter means the potential for ice, snow, and damage to plants. In addition to ice and snow, salts used on the roads and sidewalks can also be damaging to plants.

Salt damage can occur to plants when cars splash salt-laden water in the air. This salt spray lands on plants near roads and streets.

Salt can damage the buds and stems of deciduous plants as well as the foliage, buds and stems of evergreen plants.

You may have seen damage on evergreen plants on trees near a highway after a particularly bad winter where a lot of salt has been used. The foliage turns brown on the side where the spray landed.

Salt spray dries out the tissue and causes salt “burn.” Depending on the amount of salt, it may dry out the bud scales (the protective layer covering the new tissue) and cause drying of the foliage and flower buds.

Road and sidewalk salt can dissolve in the water and run-off site into the soil around plants. When absorbed by the roots, damage occurs. This usually shows up in the form of stem die-back and leaf burn. However, it may not show up until spring.

In addition, if there is a high enough salt content in the soil, water is not available for the plants to use. This can lead to poor plant growth.

We can’t change the use of road salt because of the safety factor. However, we can take steps to protect plants that are sensitive to salt damage. If your plants have experienced damage, you can physically protect them with a barrier of wood, burlap or plastic. Use something to keep the spray off of the plants.

Around your home, use de-icing salts that are labeled safe for plants. These have other salts such as magnesium, potassium or calcium chloride instead of sodium chloride.

If you are adding a new landscape planting, be sure to review the site carefully and think about the potential for salt damage to plants.

There are lists of plants that are more tolerant to salt sprays then others. For instance, Blue Shore juniper is a low-growing ground cover juniper that is recommended for areas that might have high salt potential.

There are also lists of plants that are more susceptible to salt damage such as boxwood, Eastern white pine, and viburnum.

Some plants are more affected by salt spray and others are affected by high salt content in the soil.

I don’t usually get a lot of complaints or phone calls about salt damage to plants unless we have a lot of snow and ice during the season. It’s something to be aware of and prepared for if you have the conditions and location for salt injury.

As we get closer to spring and the rains hit, the salt is leached out of the soil and damage is less apparent.