What will spring showers bring?

April showers may bring May flowers, but for your waterway, spring showers and snowmelt also bring pollutants that can seriously affect the quality of your water.

Snow is not the only thing that accumulates during the winter. Falling snow collects pollutants from the atmosphere as well as pollutants on the ground and binds them until warm spring temperatures and rainfall flush these pollutants, along with soil, sand, road salt, fertilizer, trash, yard waste, dog droppings, and other materials, directly into Muskoka's waterways.

In some areas, spring runoff accounts for over 50% of the annual load of phosphorus and suspended solids, such as soil and organic matter, in waterways.

Now that the snow is almost gone, take a look around at what is left behind, just waiting for the rain to carry it away. While sand is an invaluable aid in the winter, if left on the roads in the spring, it will make its way to local rivers and lakes and create sedimentation problems.

Effects of sedimentation

Sediment flushed into Muskoka's waterways also carries with it other pollutants, such as herbicides, fertilizers, and heavy metals, which adhere to the particles. These pollutants degrade water quality and can harm aquatic life by interfering with photosynthesis, respiration, growth and reproduction.

In addition to transporting other pollutants to the water, sediment can also alter both substrate and water column conditions.

Larger particles will settle out of the water and can bury aquatic plants and fish spawning areas, lower substrate oxygen levels, trap emerging fry, and fill the pools and pockets between rocks and boulders on which young fish depend for protection. Trout are especially vulnerable to the effects of sedimentation.

Fine sediment particles remain suspended in the water column, creating turbidity. This turbidity may prevent sunlight from reaching aquatic plants, cause water temperatures to increase, and suffocate fish and aquatic insects by adhering to their gills.

Cloudy waters reduce sunlight penetration and affect the process of photosynthesis in plants, eventually killing them. Dead plants will, in turn, increase the amount of nutrients in the water and cut off food supplies for many aquatic organisms.

What you can do

There are some steps that watershed residents can take to reduce the amount of sediment that enters Muskoka's waterways.

Homeowners should put sand and grit from their yards and driveways into their compost piles or use it to fill low spots in their gardens. They should not sweep it or flush it onto the street where it will enter the stormwater system.

Towns should sweep the streets as soon as possible in the spring to prevent sand from being washed into storm drains and then into our rivers and lakes.

Buffers strips should be maintained along waterways to trap and filter out sediment before it reaches the water.

During construction projects, disturb as little ground as necessary and try to preserve existing vegetation. Bare soil should be seeded and covered with a mulch as soon as possible to minimize erosion.

We all need to do what we can to prevent April showers from bringing more than just May flowers.