



Montgomery Soil & Water Conservation District

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"Wise Stewardship of Our Natural Heritage"

2019 Spring Storm Water Article

Washing the remainder of winter's road salt and grime off your car on one of the first warm days of the year is a tradition for many as they move into spring. It is an exciting day! The white film is washed off, leaving your vehicle shiny and clean.

Did you realize that how and where you chose to wash your vehicle can have a huge and lasting effect on the quality of our streams and rivers? The salt and grime that are not good for your ride also are not good for the fish and other living things in the stream. The dirty water from washing your winter-weary car can contain not only road salt, but soap or detergent, residue from exhaust fumes, gasoline, heavy metals from rust, and motor oil. Where does that salt and grime go when you wash it off your car? That depends on where and how you chose to wash your vehicle.

Did you know that the storm drains located along the curbs on your street flow into pipes that lead directly to our area streams and rivers? It is a common misconception that the water that flows into these drains is filtered or treated in some way. In reality, these drains are made to efficiently move the water from rainstorms away from our streets, preventing flooding on roadways and of nearby homes and businesses. The water is not cleaned, simply flowing through pipes into nearby waterways. This makes them quick and efficient for transporting rainwater, and unfortunately, also very efficient at transporting whatever else is washed or poured into a storm drain. That includes your soapy grimy water from your vehicle in the spring if you allow that water to flow into the street and down into the storm drain. The grime that has been covering your car, if it is washed down a storm drain, will soon be in the river, making the water unhealthy for the fish and other critters who live and eat there. With many people out washing their vehicles, that quickly adds up to many many gallons of dirty water entering local streams and rivers.

So, what are you to do? Should you leave your car dirty? Of course not! There are many ways you can wash your vehicle to make it bright and clean, while still protecting the water quality of streams and rivers.

1. Use a commercial car wash if at all possible. These tend to use much less water to wash your car. In addition, at most car washes the used water is sent to a treatment plant to be filtered and cleaned before going back into streams and rivers.
2. If you are washing your vehicle at home, select cleaners that are labeled 'phosphate free', 'non-toxic', and 'biodegradable'.
3. Wash your vehicle on a grass or gravel surface that will let the water soak in and be naturally filtered. That way the soap, grime and salt will be filtered by the gravel and soil, and any nutrients in the soap can be used by plants.
4. Use a spray nozzle to make sure the water is running only when you are using it to reduce the amount of water you use to wash your vehicle.
5. Use a bucket of soapy water and a sponge or rags. Then, empty the water either in the grass, or dump it down a sink or toilet when you are done. The grass will filter it, using the nutrients. Water that is dumped in the sink

or toilet will go to a treatment plant to be filtered. Using the bucket reduces the amount of water used, and also lets you choose where to get rid of the dirty water so it can be filtered before reaching area streams and rivers.

If you follow these tips, you will have a sparkly car to help celebrate the end of winter cold. You will also have healthier waterways to enjoy when summer comes. Get out and enjoy a walk along the stream, fishing in the river, or a canoe float, knowing that you have done your part to keep our waterways clean and healthy!

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