

*Everything you need to know  
about that most Canadian of chores,  
shovelling snow.* By Kim Gray

LET IT SNOW,  
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**E**very winter and after nearly every heavy snowfall, I notice her through my front window as she clears the makeshift skating rink in the park across our street. I'd offer to help, but my neighbour Patti—bundled in snow gear and barely recognizable—is lost in the rhythm of her own private shovelling world.

If you inquire, Patti will tell you she shovels because it needs to be done, because it's great exercise, because she feels fabulous—even euphoric—once she's finished the job. And because, frankly, she used to just “go play” in the snow as a child living in Montreal but now, as an adult living in Calgary, she needs a grown-up excuse to pile on the layers and embrace winter's arrival head on.

On the one hand, Patti's rink-shovelling ritual is a deeply private affair. On the other, this classic winter chore binds us all as Canadians. Whether we celebrate it or not, the act of shovelling snow is embedded, both in the past and in the present, in our collective psyche. *Scrape. Pause. Scrape. Pause. Scraape*—the rough yet comforting rasp of snow shovelling is an indelible sound of life in the Northern Hemisphere.

For example, Canadian poet Lorna Crozier, who was born in Swift Current, Sask. and currently lives in Victoria, B.C., has warm childhood memories of watching her father shovel snow in the frozen winters of her home town. “I'd be watching from the window and the whole world would be blue and hushed with snow, and everything would be silent except the scraping of my dad's grain shovel as he cleared a path from the front door to the wooden sidewalk. He wasn't the perfect father, but he was always there for the first big snowfall,” recalls Crozier. “I loved watching his strong arms and shoulders as he worked his way down the walk, throwing snow into huge piles on either side. I loved feeling that he was ensuring that we had a safe walkway from the house out into the world.”

Then there's Calgary writer Will Ferguson, who remembers undertaking this quintessential Canadian chore himself as a young boy, having been raised in northern Alberta



Illustrated by  
JOSH HOLINATY

where winters are long and hard, running from, as he remembers them, September through to the July long weekend. “I grew up hoisting and flinging shovelfuls of snow that were as heavy as wet cement. Now I live in bone-dry Calgary where the snow is often as light as dust. You can actually sweep snow off your walk! You can walk behind your shovel like you’re walking your dog! At least, you can at the start,” Ferguson responds in an e-mail when queried about the topic.

“Then, the snow starts to pile higher and higher and you think to yourself, ‘Where’s that bloody Chinook to melt it all and save me the backache?’ My neighbours often shovel each other’s walks, which is very sweet. But I have something even better. I have a teenage son—which is to say my shovelin’ days will soon be over. Time for a hot rum by the fire, I’d say.”

Canadian writer, photographer and outdoorsman Bruce Kirkby, who was recently in Alberta for the annual Banff Mountain Film and Book Festival, insists he’s far from hanging up his snow shovel. “I love it. Anything that combines fitness and utility is grand in my books,” he writes from his home in Kimberley, B.C.

So, out of curiosity, how would Kirkby describe his personal snow-shovelling technique? “Scoop and throw. I’m not a bulldozer! Most of my shovelling (consists of) paths, so I go down one side with quick fast scoops—ta, ta, ta—and then come back the other way, switching to the other arm so I make sure both biceps cramp!” he explains. “I like a smallish shovel head. Too big and it bogs down and you just stall. I like something I can move fast that eats through the snow. Doesn’t have to be pretty. Just git ’er done.”

Everyone I talk to seems to have an opinion about how best to shovel snow. Just ask our local rink shoveller, who for years has been receiving unsolicited instruction on the subject from her well-meaning spouse. “Apparently, I’m doing it all wrong,” Patti says with a laugh. “My husband tells me to split the rink up into fours and shovel it outwards from there but I get bored. I start the way I’m supposed to but then I go on my merry way.”

Sometimes, she confesses, she’ll even “go around in circles.”

The fact is, declares Patti, no one is paying her to do the job and in the final analysis, the rink is cleared and ready for the neighbourhood kids who are always anxious to lace up their skates and hit the ice for a new game of shinny. “So what’s the big deal?” she asks. “You know what I think? I think we all just have to follow our own shovels.” \*

## CHOOSE YOUR WEAPON

*The inside scoop on the best scoop for your buck (and back).*

**P**lastic or steel? Small, medium or large? Traditional versus ergonomic? There are now oodles of snow shovels to choose from. The best tool depends on the job.

For example, Jon Lutzen, who works in Home Depot’s seasonal department at North Hill, says if you’re clearing city sidewalks or cement driveways, your best bet is a shovel with a steel “wear strip,” because metal is the only material that will bite into the snow and ice that stick to cement when compressed by pedestrians and cars. One

of his bestsellers is the metal-stripped “Alpine” shovel, made by Quebec company Garant. “It’s effective and affordable and comes in a few different sizes,” he says. Garant also makes

a lightweight, blue plastic “Yukon” shovel featuring a steel wear strip.

“It’s ergonomically designed,” says Lutzen, who uses the model at home. “I have back problems. I find it useful because the shaft is bent so if you put two hands on it, you can almost stand up straight when you’re shovelling, as opposed to bending forward at the waist.”

His co-worker Viki Vervena says people ought to consider their size, too. “I’m only 99 pounds. I can’t pick up that much snow,” she says. “So you need to buy a shovel you can lift relatively easily when it’s full of snow.”

For this reason, Vervena says smaller-sized shovels are popular with children and with the elderly. Some seniors don’t even use shovels; they use corn brooms. “These folks have a great work ethic. They get up early and they sweep the snow right away when it’s light and fluffy.”

Garant spokesperson Isabelle Dorval, reached at her office in Quebec City, says today’s plastic shovels are affordable, popular and durable—especially the ones with steel wear strips on the blade. But, she notes, you don’t want to use them for breaking ice. “Then you want to use a steel or aluminum blade,” says Dorval. “Most of our sales are with plastic shovels. We just did an informal web survey and we found that only six or seven per cent of Canadians are using steel blades in the winter.”

Garant, founded in 1895, holds 93 per cent of the shovel market share in Canada. As the country’s leading producer of snow-removal tools, in January it shipped 72 of its large Yukon sleigh shovels to Cordova, a small Alaskan fishing town that had been overwhelmed with massive dumps of snow—so much so that residents needed the U.S. National Guard to help dig them out.



## ten TIPS

Snow shovelling *does* increase the risk of heart attack, researchers from Queen's University reported in 2011. And every year, 11,500 people in the U.S. show up at emergency with a snow-shovelling injury, typically involving the lower back. Be careful out there, people.



1 Don't drink coffee, tea or alcohol beforehand as they may have negative health effects.

2 Hydrate well beforehand with water or juice.

3 Shovelling snow is exercise. Consider stretching and limbering up before you head out.

4 It's especially important to remember to be on top of medications you may be taking for your heart or lungs.



5 Dress in layers in case you heat up. You may need to adjust your clothing depending on your workload.

6 When you're shovelling snow, be sure to keep a straight back as you push forward.

7 If you're lifting snow—bend your knees, lift with your legs and keep your back straight. Do not lift with your lower back area.



8 Pace yourself. Take a break if you need to. What's the rush? Once you're bundled up and outside, it's beautiful, just like Mom said.

9 If you're responsible for clearing a public sidewalk, be sure to shovel regularly. (See page 39: It's The Law, Eh?)



10 Is shovelling getting to be too much for you? No shame in asking for help. Ask a family member, a neighbour next door or hire someone to get the job done. Don't know how to get started? Dial 311 and ask the city where to begin.



## THE SHOVEL WORKOUT

*Turn an annoying chore into a "wellness opportunity."*

Ask Calgary personal fitness trainer Tammy Nishimura about the physical benefits of shovelling the white stuff, and she'll start by telling you that it's an excellent core exercise.

"I like to do 10 to 12 sweeps to the right, and then the same to the left. I treat shovelling like a 'set,'" says Nishimura. "This targets your obliques and whittles away those love handles. But you've got to be really careful. I wouldn't recommend this if you have lower back issues. If you don't have back concerns, shovelling snow is really good for your waist, your lower back and your core."

What's more, she adds, the shovelling action also works your chest muscles because you're pushing snow away from your body. "And then there's the opportunity for cardio, or getting your heart rate up, as well as muscular endurance because you're repeating the same motion over and over," she says. "Same goes for cycling or running. Any repeated action will result in increased muscular endurance." Throw in a tiny bit of Vitamin D from the sun and an increase in endorphin production (a.k.a. it feels good), along with the fact that this is one of the most "refreshing" of Canadian winter chores, and Nishimura would have you believe shovelling snow is more a wellness opportunity than an annoying job that needs doing.

All said, Adam Loria, a public education officer with Calgary EMS, recommends that snow shovellers exercise caution, particularly if they're elderly or have pre-existing heart or lung conditions, such as asthma. "I can tell you paramedics respond to a handful of calls every winter with regards to medical emergencies that come up for individuals shovelling snow," Loria says. "If people are taking medication for their heart or lungs, they especially need to be on top of taking those medications."

No question, he agrees, shovelling snow is a workout. "So you need to prepare your body and yourself beforehand," he advises. "Drink water and juice. Hydrate properly. Avoid caffeinated drinks such as coffee or tea or any alcoholic beverages because they may put a strain on your heart while you're shovelling."

Loria says people with average fitness levels should avoid twisting motions when they're lifting and throwing snow. "This does have the potential to put your back out," he warns. "I would suggest they bend their knees, lift with their legs and keep their back as straight as possible—moving in a forward motion."

Finally, he advises, when you head outdoors, remember to pace yourself. "Don't try to do too much too quickly. If for any reason you feel pain in your body, you need to stop immediately." And if, in the end, you don't feel healthy enough to shovel snow, he adds, enlist a family member or hire a neighbourhood kid looking to make a bit of cash.



**SWERVE BRIGHT IDEA:** Why doesn't somebody harness all of that energy expended at indoor gyms, and create a Snow Shovel Boot Camp to clean seniors' walks? Exercise and good deeds, all in one well-bundled package.



## SNOWBLOWER GUY PAYS IT FORWARD

**F**ifteen years ago, Terry Creighton injured his back, immediately sending him in search for an alternative to the snow shovel.

Ever since and whenever there's a snowfall, he's been waking up early, popping in earplugs and throwing on his Stihl-made Backpack Blower (the BR 430 model that sells for \$499.95). Then he tackles not only his own snowy front walk and sidewalks, but those of his neighbours, too.

"I take care of my neighbours because I get up early. I figure they won't complain about the noise if I'm clearing their paths and sidewalks as well," says the 71-year-old, who maintains there's a science to snow blowing: "You've got to get to the snow before it gets tramped down or there's this micro-layer of snow that forms that's hard to clear."

The northwest Calgary resident, who believes that a hand-held "blower" simply isn't powerful enough for typical Alberta snowfalls, confesses that while he may look like a keen-

er, being "Snowblower Guy"—an affectionate moniker given to him by his neighbours—isn't always a picnic.

"You want to know the truth? I actually hate snow. Because whenever it snows, I have to blow. That's the law. You have to clear your sidewalk within 24 hours after the snow stops," says Creighton. "So when it's minus 25 and the wind is blowing and then, on top of it, you're blowing snow crystals yourself, which come back into your face, it's horrible."

Granted, he gets some satisfaction because the walkways look so good when his work is done. And truth be told, he secretly (not so secretly now) hopes his efforts will pay off in the future. "What I'm hoping to be doing is putting money in the bank," he confesses. "I'm hoping that when I can't shovel because I'm too sick or too old or if I die before my wife, my neighbours will remember what I've done. And they'll shovel my sidewalk in return."

## who YOU GONNA CALL?

**P**erhaps you've seen her? Swaddled in snow clothes and sporting her trademark fur hat with earflaps, Kelly Taylor is always outside, shovelling driveways and sidewalks after every snowstorm.

The owner of SnowMow Maintenance Ltd. ([snowmow.ca](http://snowmow.ca)), Taylor manages six snow-clearing crews citywide, but personally hand-shovels the property around 30 houses in winter. "I have two children, six and eight. When they go to school I pick up the shovel," the entrepreneur/single mom says with a chuckle. Taylor bought the company three years ago and has since established a loyal base of 100 customers. "I have a lot of seniors who employ me directly," she says. "But I also have a lot of people who have hired me to shovel for their aging parents."

She charges an average of \$120 a month (beginning with the season's first snowfall and going through to mid-April) for regular residential snow clearing, and she offers a special rate for seniors.

Do Calgary's near Arctic temperatures ever get Taylor down? "I really don't mind the cold. Being around snow and sparkles isn't bad. By the end of the day, you're well exercised, you're happy and your mind is clear."



### WHO ELSE YA GONNA CALL?

**MEN IN KILTS:** Their motto is "We clean. You enjoy. Just remember... no peeking." Residential snow removal by one of their 40 "kilted technicians" starts at \$145 a month. **1-800-777-KILT (5458).**

**STRAND BUILDING SERVICES LTD.:** Commercial snow removal and more. "We actually help our clients out year round, doing everything from sweeping to Bobcat," says Glenn Strand, whose clients pay an average of \$1,000 a month for his services. **403-999-9470.**

**ULS MAINTENANCE & LANDSCAPING INC.:** Ninety-five per cent of the company's work is commercial but it also manages about 200 residential properties, says owner Steve Wheatcroft. Snow removal costs about \$210 a month, from Oct. 15 to April 15. **403-235-5353; [ulslandscaping.com](http://ulslandscaping.com).**



## CALLING ALL snow angels

John Mungham, a social worker with the senior services division of the City of Calgary, encourages citizens to help each other out during the snowy season. He's the spokesman for Snow Angels, a program where people voluntarily shovel their neighbours' snow-covered walks and driveways, and receive recognition for their work.

Simply **CALL 311** and say you want to nominate a snow angel. "Your snow angel will likely then receive a letter from the mayor and a pin or a scarf as a thank you," says Mungham, who handed out 609 pins and 34 scarves last year. He's often contacted by parents who see the Snow Angels program, now in its 10th year, as an excellent way to teach younger generations about creating goodwill in their neighbourhoods. "What we're talking about here is community helping community."

# cool TOOLS

Love 'em or hate 'em, noisy snowblowers, snowthrowers and snowplows have their place in the wintery urban landscape, like when you've got a very long driveway to clear or a ton of snow to push around. Remember May 1986, when 70 centimetres blanketed the city, setting an all-time snowfall record in Calgary?

According to Environment Canada, 75 per cent of our city's heaviest snowfalls (20 centimetres or more) have occurred in April and May. We get an average annual snowfall of 127 centimetres—a relative dusting when compared to Canada's snowiest city, Gander, Nfld., which gets bombed with 443 centimetres a year on average. Bonus: we're the country's sunniest winter city.



\* **STANDARD:** Winter tools by Garant feature the likes of ergonomically correct snow shovels, snow pushers and even telescopic “snow roof rakes”—which, as their name suggests, can be used like a rake to pull snow off a roof, helping to prevent winter weather damage. [garant.com](http://garant.com).

\*\* **SUPERIOR STANDARD:** Home Depot's *Snowthrower's Buying Guide* highlights everything from powered shovels (no lifting and dumping!) to gas-fuelled “lawn-mower-style” snowthrowers (breaks up, lifts and tosses snow aside). [homedepot.ca](http://homedepot.ca).



\*\*\* **COMFORT:** CanadianTire's *Snowthrower's Buying Guide* offers an informative video and a directory of every manner of snowthrower imaginable. FYI: the terms “snowblower” and “snowthrower” are often used interchangeably (they're all snow movers) but, technically, according to eHow.com, “snow blowers are larger and have bigger motors, whereas snow throwers are smaller and offer fewer capabilities.” [canadiantire.ca](http://canadiantire.ca).



\*\*\*\* **FIRST CLASS:** When the shovel, the thrower and the blower aren't enough, check out Arctic Snowplows. The company boast: “Putting winter where it belongs—on the side of the road.” We're thinking this is the province of the acreage owner, not so much the inner-city dweller. [arcticsnowplows.com](http://arcticsnowplows.com).



## IT'S THE LAW, EH?

*Snow slobs take note: Heft that shovel or pay a hefty fine.*

**W**e dug into the rules governing snow-and-ice removal in the City of Calgary (regulated under Street Bylaw 20M88 in section 67, we'll have you know).

- \* Owners/occupants are responsible for the complete removal of snow and ice from all city pathways and sidewalks, adjacent to the front or side of their property, within 24 hours after the snow stops falling.
- \* Snow and ice must be removed from a city pathway or sidewalk that runs parallel to and directly adjacent to a street, even if it is separated by a boulevard.
- \* All snow and ice must be removed down to the bare surface of the sidewalk or pathway.
- \* For the purpose of this bylaw, a sidewalk is that part of a street set aside specifically for pedestrian use, whereas a pathway is a multi-purpose thoroughfare for use by pedestrians, cyclists and persons using wheeled conveyances.
- \* The owner or occupant of land adjacent to a sidewalk must remove all snow and ice, whereas those adjacent to a pathway must remove snow and ice to a minimum width of 1.5 meters from the side of the pathway closest to their property.
- \* If you own a rental property, you are ultimately responsible for ensuring the sidewalks and pathways are cleared.
- \* Snow or ice from private property cannot be placed on a road or boulevard.
- \* If you receive a warning notice for failure to remove snow and ice from a sidewalk or pathway and do not remove it within 24 hours, the City of Calgary workforce will be instructed to carry out the work and the cost (typically about \$150) will be invoiced to the property owner. Failure to pay this will result in the cost being added to the (property owner's) property taxes.
- \* **HELPFUL HINT:** If the ice can't be removed, pick up a free sand/salt mixture from most fire halls and the city's Roads Maintenance District offices. *Source: calgary.ca.* 