

HEATED DRIVEWAYS

by Gary Wollenhaupt

You look out the window on a cold morning and see snow blanketing the yard. The only sound you hear is neighbors shoveling the driveway, clearing the way to get to work, maybe a few minutes late. Do you join them, stuffing your feet into boots and searching the house for the lost glove, stepping out in the cold?

Not if you have a heated driveway.

With a heated driveway, the snow melts off the concrete or asphalt, leaving you with a relaxed morning and a smooth start to the commute.

A heated driveway is nothing more than a simple radiant heating system that can be used with concrete or asphalt driveways, or even under paver stones. Heating systems can even be installed under existing driveways, although of course it's much easier to install in new construction.

Contractors offer two types of heating systems, and choosing the best one depends on installation costs and costs to run the system.

Hydronic systems generate hot water and then pump through plastic tubing. These systems can be more expensive to install, but may cost less to run, depending on the type of heating system. A boiler and control system heats the water, and the boiler can use electricity or natural gas to provide heat for the water-antifreeze mix. The heat radiates from the tubes into the concrete, slowly raising the temperature to above the freezing point. These systems are more easily installed in new construction, although the tubes can be installed in slots cut into an existing driveway.

Electric systems use cables embedded under the surface. These are typically simpler and cheaper to install, especially in existing driveways because the cables are smaller than the water tubes of the hydronic system. Electric systems are basically maintenance free and heat surfaces more quickly.

Both systems can be fitted with moisture sensors that start the heating when it senses snow or ice on the

driveway. Or, an on/off switch can start the heat flowing. The systems heat the surface to above the freezing point, and the melted snow and ice run off.

The cost for installing a snowmelt system varies depending on a number of factors, including whether the heated driveway can be tied into your home's heating system, or must stand on its own. Another factor is the type of control scheme you choose — a manual or an automated system. Depending on the features and the installation complexity, a heated driveway can cost between \$12 and \$21 per square foot.

While that's not a small cost for most people, it may be a bargain compared with paying someone to shovel your drive. Or it could be your own personal payoff to just go back to bed, knowing your driveway will be ready to go when you are.