With the white stuff in short supply, demand is low for snowblowers, salt

With the wistful hopes for a white Christmas behind us, few people will complain about the mild winter Ozaukee County and much of Wisconsin has been enjoying.

Still, there are some understandable grumbles from people whose livelihoods depend on the snow and ice that usually encase our area this time of the year.

Snow-related hardware sales and services have been hit hard by the absolute lack of white stuff here.imag

AARON GAVIN of Four Seasons Sales and Service in Port Washington, finds his shop filled with snowblowers at mid-winter, thanks to a season devoid of snow. Gavin jokes that the “Let It Snow” sign he placed in his front window may have created bad mojo for what is usually a busy time of year at the business. Photos by Mark Jaeger

In fact, Aaron Gavin, of Four Seasons Sales and Service in Port Washington, is considering an unconventional move to remedy the problem.

“I’m thinking about taking down the ‘Let It Snow’ sign we put in the front window in fall. Maybe it has brought us bad luck,” Gavin said.

Gavin said business has generally been good, but he is beginning to more fully appreciate the challenges of an enterprise that depends so greatly on the whims of Mother Nature.

“Our snowblower sales started out strong in fall. We had 70 machines in stock at first and sold 38 to people who wanted to be ready for the first snow,” Gavin said.

Based on those initial sales of Simplicity and Snapper equipment, he said the shop ordered 18 more snowblowers. Now, they all sit in the shop, waiting for seasonal demand to pick up.

Gavin said the shop also has a nice selection of refurbished snowblowers, traded in when new machines were purchased.

“Those will be the first to go when it finally does snow because you can get them at a really good price,” he said.

“We do a lot of repair and maintenance work on equipment, too. After that first surge of people who wanted tune ups done before winter, we are waiting for the next batch. That will be from the people who don’t realize their snowblowers aren’t working until a significant snow falls.”

Some problems don’t surface until equipment is put to the test of winter use.

“It doesn’t have to be a big snow, just a couple of inches will do it. Then, everyone is going to want to have their machines fixed at once. I am afraid that is going to lead to some very long nights for us, especially having to haul the snowblowers to all the customers’ homes,” Gavin said.

Despite the prospects for a chaotic stretch in the near future, he has a one-track mind this time of year.

“I just hope it snows … soon,” Gavin said.

He said the first time he sees some customers is when their machines break down, and that can be an eye-opening experience.

“A lot of people buy cheap snowblowers or lawn mowers at big-box stores, and then are shocked when they come in for repairs. It might cost them $100 or $150 for the work we have to do, and they’ll always say, ‘I only paid $300 for the machine,’” Gavin said.

“Those are cases where you get what you pay for.”

Gavin said he is not blind to the flip side of the weather coin, either.

“We actually had a great summer and fall. People were still cutting their lawn into November, and that meant they had to keep having their mowers serviced when they broke down,” he said.

The snow waiting game is also being played at Stevlin’s Hardware, 2440 Hwy. 33, in Port Washington. The store is an independent member of the Do It Best chain.

“You can really tell that we haven’t had any snow by the amount of salt we have on hand. It’s January, and we are still on our first shipment (48 bags). We usually have to reorder by this time of the season,” said store owner Steve Boyea.

“We have a number of commercial customers who ordered their supply before winter started, but most people wait to get salt until there is snow and ice.”

Five new snowblowers also stand at the entry to the store, and racks of snow shovels hang ignored on the wall.

“That almost never happens by this time of year. Part of our problem is that people have gotten into the habit of avoiding this area because of the road construction. It is better now that the work is done for the season, but there is nowhere near the traffic in the store that we used to get,” Boyea said.

“We have had to suffer through two years of recession, then the highway project, which now is going to extend into another year. It has been tough.”

Still, he said nothing will give a jolt to his business like a realdose of winter.

“It might not solve everything, but some snow would really help us. We even noticed more people coming in to pick up salt after the little bit of snow we got on Sunday,” Boyea said.