

Septic Maintenance Tips

INSIDE

Conserve water. Fix leaks and drips. If you replace old fixtures, install new "low flow" types.

Do not overload the system -- this is the primary cause of system failures. Early morning and bedtime are peak water use times in the bathroom. Run dishwashers and washing machines at other times of the day. Don't do all the family laundry in one day.

Do not use a garbage disposal or dump coffee grounds in the sink. Increasing the load of solids into the tank decreases the capacity and shortens the interval between pumping.

Do not pour fats and oils down the drain. They can build up and clog the septic tank pipes.

Put paper towels, tissue, cigarette butts, disposable diapers, sanitary napkins, tampons and other material in a trash can, not the toilet.

You do NOT need to add any commercial products or yeast to your system. Additives do not improve how well your system works. There are always plenty of natural bacteria available to do the job. (They come from YOUR digestive system.) In fact, additives can damage your system by breaking up the sludge and scum layers, causing them to flush out of the tank and clog the infiltration bed. Additives that say "Never worry about pumping your septic tank again" are the worst!

Use normal amounts of detergents, bleaches, drain cleaners, household cleaners and other products. Avoid dumping solvents like dry cleaning fluid, pesticides, photographic chemicals, paint thinner, or auto products down the drain.

Space your laundry loads and conserve water! Short showers, never leaving water run down a drain while washing dishes, full wash loads only (or adjusting the water level for a small load), and never doing back to back loads of laundry will all help conserve water, and therefore the amount of wastewater going into the system.

In the septic tank, only about 50 percent of solids are broken down by bacteria, the rest accumulate in the bottom of the tank until they are pumped out. Having too many solids accumulated, and too much water entering the tank at once (like doing several loads of laundry in one morning), can cause the solids to be flushed out into the drain field where it can clog it.

What Kind of Toilet Paper Should I Use?

There are not many toilet papers on the market, if any, that can't safely be used in a septic system. Toilet paper breaks down very easily and quickly, and that's the important part. However, facial tissue (Kleenex) and paper towels do NOT break down easily, and should never be flushed down a toilet.

OUTSIDE

Direct down spouts and runoff away from the septic field to avoid saturating the area with excess water.

Dense grass cover and other shallow rooted plants are beneficial over a septic field. However, do not plant trees because large plant roots can clog or break the pipes.

Avoid compacting the soil over the infiltration area. Do not drive or park vehicles over the area and don't build a shed or driveway in this area. These activities can also crack pipes or cause the distribution box to settle unevenly, meaning that effluent will only flow into part of the drain field.

Tanks need to be pumped every two to five years, depending on use. If the tank gets too full, particles of scum or sludge will flush out of the tank. This material will clog the drain tiles and cause the septic system to fail.

Hire a licensed professional (listed in the phone book under "septic tank cleaners") to pump the waste out of your tank. The tank should be pumped out through the manhole, not the smaller inspection ports. The tank should be cleaned completely, leaving nothing in the tank. Make sure the baffles are inspected and that the tank is checked for leaks.

How Close Can I Plant Trees?

The rule of thumb is that a tree's roots are as wide as the tree's canopy (branch spread). But this doesn't account for all species of trees, or the depth of the roots. When it comes to a septic system, it is best to only have grass planted above and around the system. Shallow rooted plants (ask your local Cooperative Extension expert or the Nursery employees), small shrubs, and flowers usually can be safely planted near and above the system. But trees really should be avoided. A weeping willow tree, or other species that really have a massive root system should NEVER be planted ANYWHERE near a septic system!