



SEPTIC SYSTEMS Q&A

WHAT IS A SEPTIC TANK?

A traditional septic tank is a large container (concrete or plastic) usually buried near a home that receives all of the home's waste water. Solids settle to the bottom and grease and lighter solids float on the top. Healthy bacteria continually break down solid materials and allow effluents to leave the tank to be dispersed through a leaching field. The septic tank is usually buried near your house and connected to your indoor plumbing (some systems require pump installation). Private septic systems are temporary systems, their lifespan depending on as installation, maintenance, usage, type of soil and surrounding drainage area. Pumping your septic tank is one of the best and least expensive means by which to maintain your septic system. Tertiary Septic Systems (trickle bio-filter or bubbler/aeration) reduce the strength of residential waste and allow reducing to 1/2 or even 1/4 the size of leaching bed. They all require maintenance agreements.

WHAT SHOULD NOT GO INTO SEPTIC TANK? To prolong septic tank life ensure that only human wastewater enters the tank (bathrooms, sink, dishwasher, toilets, laundry). In moderation, a properly working septic tank can handle some biodegradable detergents, laundry soaps, kitchen wastes, and biodegradable household chemicals. In large amounts, any and all of these things can limit the digestive properties of your septic tank. Don't pour grease, fats, oils or put coffee grounds and egg shells down the drain. Avoid flushing: cigarette butts, disposable wipes and diapers, sanitary napkins, condoms, paper towels, cotton swabs, static cling sheets, dental floss, cat litter (including "flushable" varieties), hair, Kleenex and plastics. Harsh chemicals can kill the good bacteria the septic tank. Items that not readily decompose may clog the baffles and prevent proper fluid flow inside the septic tank.

WHAT IS A LEACHING/DRAINING FIELD/BED? A leaching field (conventional, raised or filtered) is the area through which effluent from the septic tank is dispersed into the soil to be filtered. In the leaching field, the effluent moves through the pipes (clay or plastic) and seeps into the surrounding soil. The soil filters out suspended solids and organic matter. Bacteria in the soil then decompose harmful microorganisms and other organic components. Leaching fields are not always built the same way or the same size. Things like soil types, topography, trees, and nearby wells can all dictate the size and design specifics of a leaching field. You have to be careful what you choose to plant near the field. Trees or shrubs can cause damage, vegetable or fruit gardens could be contaminated if placed too close. **NOTE** septic systems must have the replacement or reserve area that may be used for replacing or expanding the drainfield. It must meet the same criteria, such as acceptable soils, setbacks, etc., as a regular drainfield and should be protected in the same way. Do not build a carport, camper pad, a tennis court or hot

tub over the drainfield or replacement area!!! Keep downspouts and stormwater from surfaces such as driveways and patios away from the septic tank and drainfield. A sprinkler system - water lines should be at least 10 feet from all components of the septic system. Be sure all sprinkler lines are fitted with approved backflow prevention devices. Contact authorities when considering retaining wall or French drain near ANY PART of the septic system. Keep in mind maintaining required distance between leaching bed, septic and your well.

HOW TO TELL IF SEPTIC TANK IS WORKING PROPERLY? Two very obvious signs are strange odors and standing waste water in the yard where the leaching field should be. However, not all malfunctioning septic systems show these clear signs. Regular inspections may prevent costly failure. Here are 3 reasons to care for your septic system: **Save money.** A failing septic system can be expensive to repair or replace. **Protect the health of your family and neighbors.** A failing septic system can release inadequately treated household wastewater and offensive odors, often right in the backyard it can pose health risks to your family and your neighbors. **Protect water quality.** A septic system may release untreated or partially treated wastewater if the system fails. Inadequately treated water can pollute streams, lakes, and groundwater, some of which are drinking water supplies. Failing systems also leak excessive nutrients and bacteria to streams, lakes, and the ocean, destroying plant and animal habitat, closing beaches, and hurting the fishing industry. In the early staged repairs are possible (fix a crushed or collapsed pipe, to replace a broken baffle that has allowed solids into the leach field, or to replace a cracked or collapsed septic tank lid).

CONSERVE WATER!!!! There are limits to the amount of water septic systems can treat. For every gallon entering the tank, one gallon is pushed out. In some instances, too much water may back up into your house or overload the drainfield and surface in the yard. Large volumes of water in short periods of time may also not allow solids enough time to settle, and may be carried out to the drainfield, ultimately clogging the pipes. Tertiary systems will flood and require pumping.

Prepared using materials from:

Clear Choices Clean Water: [http://www.clearchoicescleanwater.org/;](http://www.clearchoicescleanwater.org/)

Septic Smart: http://www.rvca.ca/osso/things_to_know/septic_information.html