

# Septic Do's and Don'ts

Your septic system is designed to give you many years of service. But like other systems within and around your home, your septic system can become overwhelmed with use and misuse. It's important to realize that the average septic system will need to be pumped free of solids once every 4 years and has an overall life expectancy of about 20 years. Usually you can reach or exceed these timeframes by applying the following suggestions:

## **1. Start by minimizing the amount of solid material that goes into your septic system.**

Your system has been designed to handle human waste and toilet paper. Obviously, anything you can do to minimize the introduction of additional solids will help delay the need to pump-out your system. Here are a few suggestions:

- If you have a garbage disposal, avoid using it as much as possible. Food preparation debris dramatically add to the solids entering your system
- Cooking oils and grease should be thrown out with the trash. Once they enter the septic system they tend to harden and will eventually clog drain pipes and increase the need for tank cleaning.
- Non-biodegradable items must be kept out of the system: Remind guests of the need to avoid flushing: cigarette butts, diapers, feminine napkins and tampons, paper towels and tissues.
- Some bio-degradable and semi-biodegradable items should also be thrown out with the trash. These include: egg shells, coffee grounds, cat litter, clothes dryer lint, and vacuum debris.

## **2. Reduce Water Usage**

Septic tank capacities typically vary from 750 gallons to 1500 gallons or more depending on the number of bedrooms. Conserving water is a proactive step you can take to avoid overloading your septic system. Once a system becomes overloaded with fluid, solid waste moves into the leach field and can quickly block or reduce the leach field's effectiveness.

- Leaky faucets and toilets. Watch this carefully. A stuck toilet flapper can result in as much as three gallons a minute entering your system. This is especially tough on a system that is expecting a max of 100 gallons per person per day. Toilet flapper leaks can be almost imperceptible. An effective test is to place enough food coloring dye in the tank to visibly color the water. Then, without flushing, wait a half hour or so and see if the color of the water in the toilet bowl changes. If so you will need to clean the seat on the flapper or change it. . Over time, leaky faucets are just as problematic, as the constant addition of fluid can eventually contribute to tank overflow.
- Avoid long showers and full baths. In larger families, reducing the size of the hot water heater can help control shower usage.
- Water saving shower heads are now available and are easily installed by the average homeowner.
- The average washing machine uses forty gallons of water per load. Limiting laundry to full loads and avoiding trying to wash multiple loads on the same day can reduce the impact on your septic system. The same thing is true about dishwashers. Where legal and practical, you may be able to divert dishwasher and kitchen sink fluid as grey water to garden or other area of your property.

### **3. Limit Chemical Usage**

Your septic system contains beneficial bacteria that help process and dissolve solid waste. These bacteria are active both in your tank and in your leach field. Since these bacteria are helping you delay the frequency that you need to pump-out your system and replace your leach field, you will want to protect them. And ultimately, the chemicals will pass through the filter of your leach field and contaminate the groundwater. The following suggestions will help:

- Don't use caustic cleaners such as Drain-O when you have a clogged drain. Try boiling water or a snake. Snakes come in different sizes and are available at home centers.
- Avoid antibacterial soaps. Increasing evidence points to the need to avoid these soaps personally as they tend to increase the likelihood of skin infections. And, of course, they kill the beneficial bacteria in your septic system.
- Bleach and other household cleaners should be used sparingly.
- Don't use additives that are advertised to improve your septic system's life. They are not proven to be effective and may actually harm your system.
- Clean paint brushes outside rather than in the sink.
- When it comes to chemicals, it's a good idea to remember that if you only feel safe wearing gloves when you handle them, then it's a good bet that you won't want to put these items down your drain.

### **4. Keep surface water away from your leach field**

Rainfall and snowfall generate surface water. Care must be taken to grade the area around your leach field to facilitate surface runoff. When water is allowed to stand or pond above your leach field, the field's soil can become saturated and will limit your leach field's ability to absorb and treat your wastewater.

- Route roof discharge drains away from your leach field. Same thing with the sump-pump discharge water.
- You should be equally cautious about any water that is being directed over your septic tanks themselves. If the water table is allowed to rise above the tank seals, the risk of a seal breach increases. If the seal is breached and water enters the tanks from the seals, the leach field will become overloaded and clogged leading to premature system failure.

### **5. Take care when planting trees and shrubs**

Trees and shrubs that use a lot of water generate a deep and dense root structure. These types of vegetation need to be kept well away from your leach field. If they are already present, they should be removed without disturbing the existing root structure. Deep rooted trees and shrubs can penetrate your leach field pipes and chambers and strangulate the discharge flow.

- Avoid deep rooted trees, as well as water loving trees. These include willows, cottonwoods, poplars, beeches, elms, red and silver maples.
- Shallow rooted trees are better choices when planted no closer to drains than the potential drip line of the tree when it reaches maturity. These include cherries, crabapples, dogwoods, hemlock, oaks, pines, sourwoods, hollies, cedars and boxwoods.
- Grasses and perennial flowers are the best choices for direct cover of leach fields.

## **6. Avoid compacting your leach field**

You will want to avoid building driveways across your leach field to prevent the leach field from becoming compacted. Similarly, you will want to avoid allowing heavy machinery or trucks to cross your leach field as they will contribute to soil compaction and will reduce your field's ability to process wastewater.

- Keep earthmoving equipment off your leach field
- Don't park or drive over your leach field
- Don't build patios, tennis courts, or other waterproof surfaces over any part of your leach field