Ten Most Asked Questions About Septic Systems

Q: Do I need to add anything to my septic system to keep it working properly?

A: While many products on the market claim to help septic systems work better, the truth is there is no magic potion to cure an ailing system. In fact, most engineers and health professionals believe that commercial septic system additives are, at best, useless, and at worst, potentially harmful to the system.

There are two types of septic system additives: biological (like bacteria, enzymes, and yeast) and chemical. Most biological additives are harmless, but some chemical additives can potentially harm the soil in the drain field and contaminate the ground water. The general consensus amount septic system experts is that septic system additives are unnecessary.

Q: What type of toilet paper is best for septic tanks?

A: Contrary to popular belief, it is not necessary to sacrifice personal comfort to protect your septic tank. There are many types of toilet paper on the market that are perfectly safe for septic systems.

According to the National Sanitation Foundation (NSF), a nonprofit organization that test products relating to health and the environment, the thickness and the color of toilet tissue does not necessarily affect its biodegradability. NSF subjects the toilet papers it certifies to rigorous testing, and the brands that pass carry the NSF mark stating that they are safe for use with septic systems. However, there probably are many brands without the NSF mark that are also safe.

Q: Does the use of household cleaners harm my septic system?

A: Household cleaners, such as bleach, disinfectants, and drain and toilet bowl cleaners should be used in moderation and only in accordance with product labels. Overuse of these products can harm your system. It makes sense to try to keep all toxic and hazardous chemicals out of your septic tank system when possible.

Q: How often should I have my septic tank pumped?

A: Pumping your septic tank is probably the single most important thing you can do to protect your system. If the buildup of solids in the tank becomes too high and solids move to the drain field, this could clog and strain the system to the point where repairs or possible replacement of the system could become necessary. How often your tank needs to be pumped depends on the tank size, the number of people living in your home, how often you entertain guest or have large parties, or if a garbage disposal is utilized. It is a good idea to be present when your tank is being pumped. Make sure that you hire a licensed pumping contractor who uses the manhole to access the tank and not the inspection port. Pumping through the inspection ports can cause damage to the tank baffles or sanitary tees. In addition make sure that all material in the tank is removed. Pumping the tank is to remove the solids that have built up over time. It is not necessary to leave anything in the tank to “restart” the biological process, but it is also not necessary to scrub or disinfect the tank.

Tank Size	Household - Number of Persons					
(gals.)	1	2	3	4	5	6
500	5.8	2.6	1.5	1.0	0.7	0.4
750	9.1	4.2	2.6	1.8	1.3	1.0
900	11.0	5.2	3.3	2.3	1.7	1.3
1000	12.4	5.9	3.7	2.6	2.0	1.5
1250	15.6	7.5	4.8	3.4	2.6	2.0
1500	18.9	9.1	5.9	4.2	3.3	2.6

Q: I would like to landscape the area where my septic system is installed, what can I do?

A: Grass or wildflowers are the most appropriate cover for the drainfield/ lateral field area. Systems such as Wetland or Mound systems can be landscaped with grasses and flowering materials. However, no matter the system, never plant anything with deep roots such as shrubs and trees. Deep rooted plants can damage the system, resulting in possible costly repairs.

Q: I would like to utilize the open space over the lateral field area. Can I place a gazebo, above ground pool, or a holding/training area for my livestock or other large animals over it?

A: Never build or place any structure of any kind over the lateral field area. Never allow anyone to drive or operate heavy equipment or motor vehicles nor build corrals or other type pens over the lateral field. All of these and many other similar types of activities will cause compaction to the soil and damage the function of the lateral field. Compaction of the field area will ultimately result in costly repairs or possible replacement of the existing system.

Q: I understand that the septic tank should be inspected regularly. I really can't see well into it. Should I get down inside the tank to insure that all the components, such as baffles and tees are in place?

A: Be sure to exercise appropriate caution when inspecting a septic tank. Never allow any untrained persons to inspect a septic tank alone or go down into a septic tank. Toxic gases are produced by the natural treatment processes in the tank and can kill in minutes. Even just looking in the tank can be dangerous. If it is necessary for someone to enter the tank for repairs or alterations professional septic technicians should be employed. The technicians should utilize special safety equipment while performing the required work.

Q: How can I keep excessive water from my lateral field or other portions of my septic system?

A: Surface water and ground water can over tax the lateral field area. Inspect roof drains, house footing drains, and sump pumps to insure that they are diverted away from the lateral field area. Should surface water or ground water be present and flowing from outside sources, installing a curtain drain around the perimeter of the lateral field can provide some assistance.

If the gray water, washer water only in Kentucky, is currently connected to the septic system, installing a washer line will be of great benefit to the overall system. Ultimately, practicing water conservation by reducing the length of showers, installing low-flow toilets or adjusting existing toilets to reduce water utilized, insuring that all faucets and fixtures are void of any leaks and running full loads in the dishwasher will make a difference.

Per Person in gallons	Normal Daily Average	Daily with Low-Flow Fixtures
Toilet	19.3	9.3
Clothes Washer	16.8	11.8
Shower	13.2	11.1
Faucets	11.4	11.1
Leaks	9.4	4.7
Bath	1.3	1.3
Dishwasher	1.0	1.0
Other	1.6	1.6
TOTALS	**74.0**	**51.9**

Q: The water in my area is hard. Would a water softener be harmful to my septic system?

A: No matter what type of system you have installed, a water softener should not be utilized. The excessive amount of salt that is disbursed into the system, due to the softening agent, will harm the necessary bacteria in the septic tank. Therefore, the required breakdown of solids does not take place as it should. In Aeration Treatment Units utilized for Spray or Direct Discharge, softeners can also kill the bacteria causing the unit to disburse improperly treated effluent on the property where children and pets may come into contact with it. If a water softer is essential, a separate lateral bed or distribution location should be developed for the softer. Keep any disbursement from the softener entering the septic system.

Q: I have never been responsible for a sewage system before. What or how is the best way to insure proper care and long term usage of

my system.

A: There are many types of systems and combinations utilized today. It would be difficult to give specific information on each. However, general maintenance of the tanks with proper pumpings is a must. Should the homeowner not be completely knowledgeable of their particular system, they should contact the local health department for printed materials or a seminar or class given in the community that may explain to them further the general workings of their sewage system. Even with all of this, important problem signs can be missed by an unlicensed and untrained individual. Given this fact, homeowner my elect to employee a septic system company to be fully responsible for their system. With a train technician performing all required operation and maintenance, the system will continue to function as designed.