

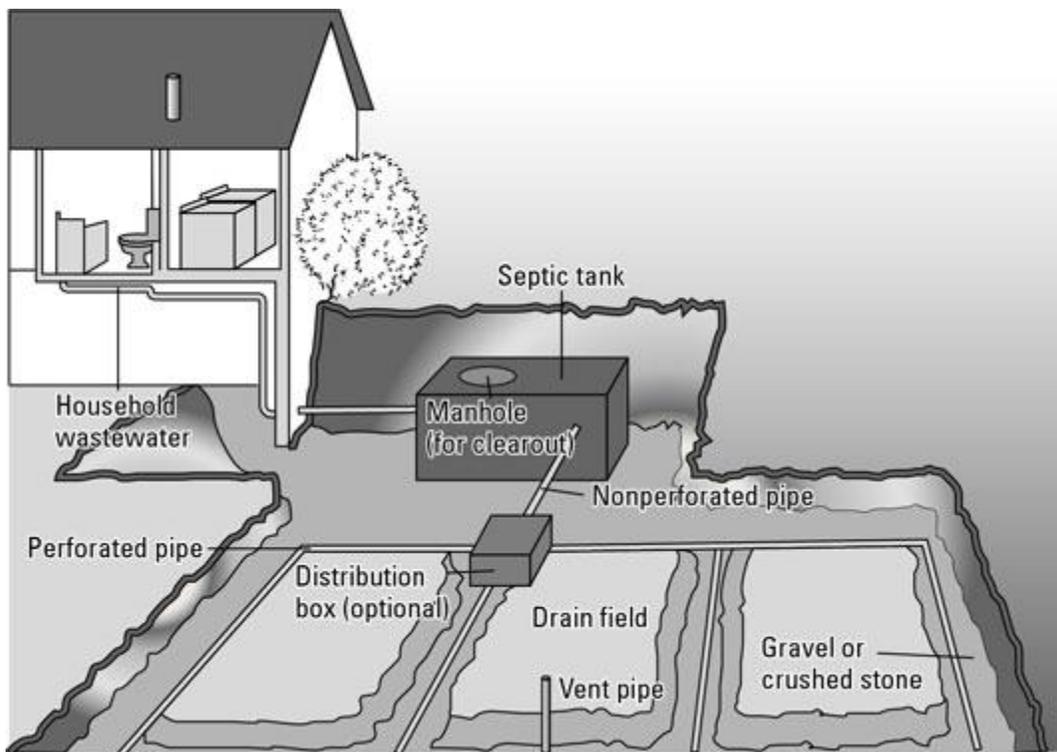
How to Care for Your Septic System

By [James Carey](#) and [Morris Carey](#) from [Home Maintenance For Dummies, 2nd Edition](#)

If you live in a rural area or have vacation property in the middle of nowhere, you're no doubt familiar with the form and function of a septic system. In brief, a septic system is your very own onsite sewage treatment facility. It's used primarily where access to a municipal sewer system is neither available nor economically practical. A septic system is out of sight and is odorless (when properly maintained).

A septic system is reasonably maintenance-free. A well-constructed, properly maintained tank could last indefinitely. However, the *leach field* (the underground area where all of the sewage drainpipes are located) will most likely require some treatment or perhaps replacement after about 15 to 20 years of service.

Following a few simple rules — like not using too much water and not depositing materials in the septic tank that bacteria can't decompose — should help to make a septic system trouble-free for many years. But don't forget that the septic tank does need to be cleaned out when too many solids build up.



Be mindful about what you and your family put into your septic system. It doesn't take much to upset the delicate biological balance within the tank. You can extend the life of a septic system by watching everything that's introduced to the system.

Keep in mind the following recommendations:

- **Too much water can upset the delicate biological balance within the tank, thus defeating its ability to work wonders.** Moreover, discharging more water into the system than it can handle can cause it to back up — not a desirable occurrence.
- **Don't use excessive amounts of any household chemicals.** You can use normal amounts of household detergents, bleaches, drain cleaners, and other household chemicals without stopping the bacterial action in the septic tank. But, for example, don't dump cleaning water for latex paintbrushes and cans into the house sewer.
- **Don't deposit coffee grounds, cooking fats, *wet-strength towels* (paper towels that don't dissolve easily, like the heavy-duty kind), disposable diapers, facial tissues, cigarette butts, and other non-decomposable materials into the house sewer.** These materials won't decompose, will fill the septic tank and will plug the system.

Use a high-quality toilet tissue that breaks up easily when wet. One way to find out if your toilet paper fits this description is to put a handful of toilet tissue in a fruit jar half-full of water. Shake the jar, and if the tissue breaks up easily, the product is suitable for the septic tank.

- **Avoid dumping grease down the drain.** It may plug sewer pipes or build up in the septic tank and plug the inlet. Keep a separate container for waste grease and throw it out with the garbage.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, because of the presence of significant numbers and types of bacteria, enzymes, yeasts, and other fungi and microorganisms in typical residential and commercial wastewaters, the use of septic-system additives containing these or any other ingredients is not recommended.

You need to have your septic tank pumped and cleaned by a professional every one to three years. A septic tank in a northern climate will need to have the solids removed more often than a tank farther south. (This geographic variance is primarily because cooler temperatures inhibit bacterial action and provide less decomposition of the sewage solids.) How often you need to have your septic tank pumped also depends on the size of the tank, the volume of wastewater, and how many solids go into it. Constant foul odor, slow drains, and drains that back up are all telltale signs that your septic tank needs pumping. When in doubt, call in a septic pro.

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Preventing Failures

Septic tank systems fail when the drainfield does not dispose of sewage as rapidly as it is being added to the system. Thus, improvements that reduce the amount of incoming water or improve the quality of wastewater passing through the system will increase the system's longevity. Other important considerations include the following:

A drainfield can be damaged by compaction due to vehicular traffic and can be blocked by excessive shrubbery or tree root growth. The drainfield should be unobstructed and seeded with grass. Grass and sunlight aid evaporation.

Washing machines are responsible for large volumes of water entering the septic tank. The surge of wash water can create turbulence in the tank which increases the amount of solids flushed into the drainfield. Space washings throughout the week rather than doing many loads at a time, or, install a separate system for washing machine water.

Cooking oils and grease are trouble makers. The type of bacteria found in septic tanks and drainfields do not survive or function well in solidified grease. Grease and cooking fats should never be washed down the sink drain. Save grease in jars or cans for disposal in the garbage.

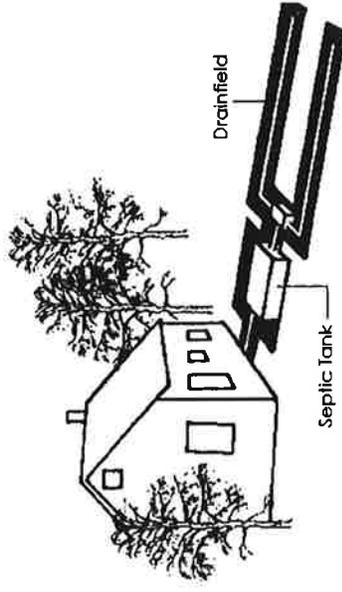
Do's

- Know the location and capacity of your septic tank system.
- Have a licensed contractor inspect the tank at least every three years.
- Have tank pumped when the combined depth of the sludge and scum equals 1/3 of the tank liquid volume.
- Install the system so that rainfall and surface water will flow away from the drainfield.
- Grow grass above the system.
- Install water conservation fixtures or devices to reduce the total volume of water entering the system.
- Keep plumbing fixtures such as toilets and faucets in good repair to prevent leakage and wasting of water.

Don'ts

- Never flush paper towels, newspapers, wrapping paper, rags or sticks into the system.
- Never allow large, irregular, intermittent or constant volumes of clear water into the system, as with a leaking toilet or faucet.
- Never over-use ordinary household cleaning chemicals that will be flushed into the system.
- Never pour out or empty hobby or home industry chemicals into the system.
- Never allow grease or other bulky waste to enter the system.
- Never flush toxic materials such as pesticides into the system.
- Never plant trees or shrubbery in the drainfield.
- Never allow vehicles (cars, trucks, etc.) to drive across or park on the drainfield. (Protect it from being crushed.)
- Never waste water.
- Never use chemical solvents to clean plumbing lines or a septic tank system.

SEPTIC TANK SYSTEMS



A Typical Individual Home Septic Tank System

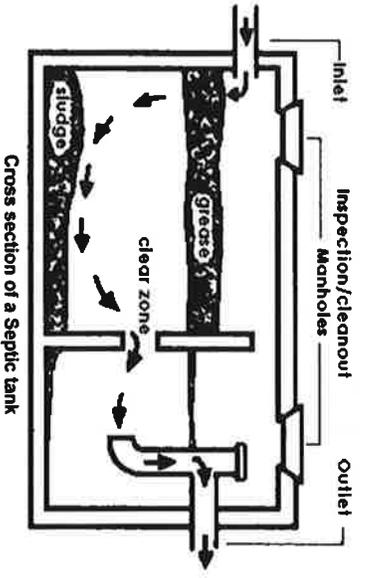
County Health Department Information

Septic Tank Contractor Information

Name: _____
Phone Number: _____
Registration Number: _____

PUBLIC INFORMATION
DH/PI 150-88, 12/97

The Septic Tank Home Wastewater Treatment and Disposal System



What is A Septic Tank System?

A septic tank system consists of a large, watertight tank that receives wastewater from the home plumbing system. The tank is followed by an underground drainfield consisting of a network of perforated pipe or chambers for distributing partially treated water from the septic tank to the soil for final treatment and disposal.

How Does It Work?

Septic tanks contain bacteria that grow best in oxygen-poor conditions. These bacteria carry out a portion of the treatment process by converting most solids into liquids and gases. Bacteria that require oxygen thrive in the drainfield and complete the treatment process begun in the septic tank. If the septic tank is working well, the wastewater which flows out of the tank is relatively clear, although it still has an odor and may carry disease organisms. It should flow only into the drainfield. NEVER ONTO THE GROUND SURFACE OR INTO FLORIDA WATERS!!!

Operation and Maintenance

After the septic tank system is placed in service, proper operation and maintenance of the system will ensure continued efficient service and prevent sudden replacement expenses. The septic tank and drainfield are designed and installed to handle a maximum calculated daily sewage flow. Consistently exceeding the design flow will eventually overload the

system and cause failure. The tank may receive new solids faster than it can treat them and the drainfield may become saturated from excessive water use. Various products are on the market which are said to start, accelerate or improve the action in the septic tank. Since all necessary bacteria are already present in the sewage entering the system, such products are not recommended.

Maintenance of a septic tank will depend largely on the daily sewage flow and individual household wastewater characteristics. With ordinary use and care, a septic tank should not require pumping out more than once every three to five years. It should, however, be inspected to determine the depth of accumulated sludge and grease.

Waste from kitchen garbage disposal units puts an extra load on a septic tank system. If a disposal is used, the capacity of the tank should be increased to handle the increased solid wastes. The tank may also require more frequent pumping to remove accumulated solid waste buildup.

Failure to pump out a septic tank system when indicated will result in solids or greases overflowing into the drainfield, which in turn may become clogged and stop functioning. In this event, not only will the tank have to be pumped out, but the drainfield may also have to be replaced.

Septic tanks can be cleaned by septic tank cleaning firms permitted by the county health department. This type of work should be done only by experienced professionals who will pump the entire contents of the tank into a tank truck and dispose of the contents in an approved, sanitary manner.

Septic tanks installed after January 1, 1998, are required to have outlet filters. For information on how to service/clean the filter, call your septic tank contractor or county health department.

Location

Contaminants can travel long distances in some soils. Therefore, drinking water wells should be located at least 75 feet from any part of a septic tank system. With certain exceptions, septic tanks and drainfields must be located at least 75 feet away from the high water line of ponds, rivers and lakes. Also, the drainfield should be located so that it will not be saturated by surface water drainage or runoff from roof gutters.

Sketch the location of your tank and drainfield

Tank Capacity _____ gals.

Drainfield Size _____ sq. ft.

Permit Number _____

Maintenance Record		
Date	Service Provided	Contractor Name
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
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