

## Home & Environment

# Septic System Maintenance

*Brad D. Lee, Plant and Soil Sciences*

After purchasing a new or existing home, most homeowners probably do not expect to pay several thousand dollars to provide adequate waste disposal. But that's what frequently happens to many new homeowners due to failed septic systems. Backyard seepage, toilets that won't flush, bathtubs that won't drain, and illnesses from contaminated drinking water are a few of the problems related to these failures, not to mention the frustration of high repair costs. This publication provides homeowners with a basic introduction to septic systems by explaining how septic systems function and suggesting ways to better maintain systems and increase their longevity.

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- Maintenance Tips for a Healthier Septic System
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### How a Septic System Works

Traditional septic systems (Figure 1) are made up of three main parts:

- The septic tank
- The distribution box and pipe network
- The absorption field

Wastewater is directed to the tank once it leaves the home. In the tank, the solids in the wastewater separate from the liquid effluent over a period of about 24 to 48 hours. Greases and fats in the wastewater are lighter and tend to float to the top of the tank, forming a scum layer. The heavier wastewater particles settle to the bottom, forming a layer of sludge. In between the sludge and scum

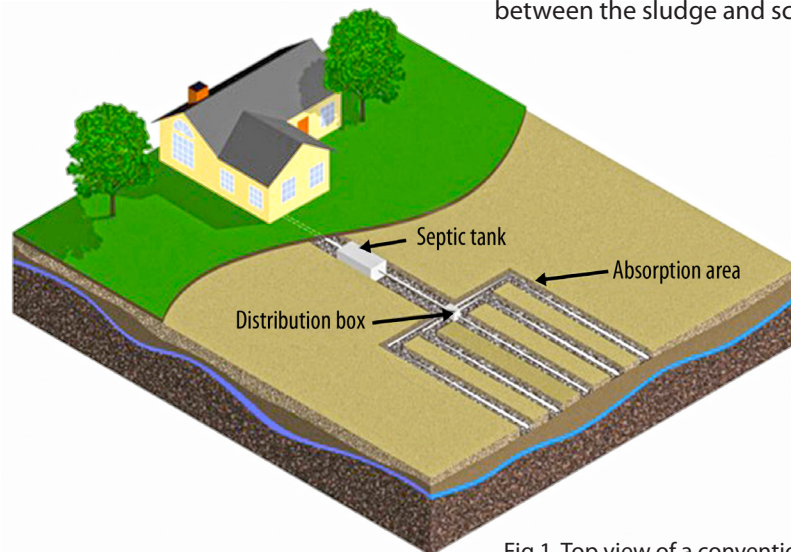


Fig 1. Top view of a conventional septic system, the most common septic system in the U.S. (Sharron Katz)

## Maintenance Tips for a Healthier Septic System

- Avoid using septic system additives.
- Have the tank pumped at regular intervals. Every three to five years for most homes.
- Minimize excess water use
- Minimize garbage disposal use; compost or throw food wastes in the garbage.
- Avoid planting trees around the system, especially near the absorption field inlet pipe.
- Avoid flushing any object or substance that does not easily decompose.
- Avoid vehicular traffic and construction activities in the absorption field area before and after installation.
- Divert run-off water from your lawn, roof, and basement drain away from the absorption field.
- Prevent chemicals and petroleum products from entering the system.
- NEVER ENTER OR PUT YOUR HEAD IN A SEPTIC TANK.

layers is the liquid portion (or clarified effluent) that is discharged to a soil absorption field (Figure 2). Baffles at the tank's outlet prevent solids from overflowing and plugging the pipes and soil pores in the soil absorption field. Baffles also dampen fast-moving water entering the tank from the home, preventing turbulence in the tank that can disrupt the wastewater separation process.

Effluent screens are devices that are very effective at preventing solids from leaving the tank and allowing only the clear liquid portion of the wastewater to discharge to the soil absorption field. New septic tanks can be built with effluent screens that attach to the baffle at the outlet end of the tank. Existing tanks can (and should) be retrofitted with effluent screens whenever possible, since they protect the soil absorption field, the most expensive part of the system.

When wastewater effluent exits the septic tank, it is transferred to a distribution box via a watertight pipe.

The distribution box is a concrete or plastic box containing several outlet ports that are installed at the same elevation and that dispense the effluent equally among the absorption field's trenches. If the trench outlets are not at the same elevation, one trench will receive more effluent than another, which could overload and damage that portion of the soil absorption field.

The soil absorption field is where the final treatment processes take place. Effluent flows from the distribution box through several solid pipes into a series of parallel trenches in the soil. Each trench contains a perforated pipe surrounded by gravel. Effluent moves through the perforated pipes, trickles through the gravel, and is introduced into the soil (Figure 3). Most absorption field trenches are filled with gravel; however there are many substitutes available. Contact your local county health department for more information about gravel substitutes that can be used in your area.

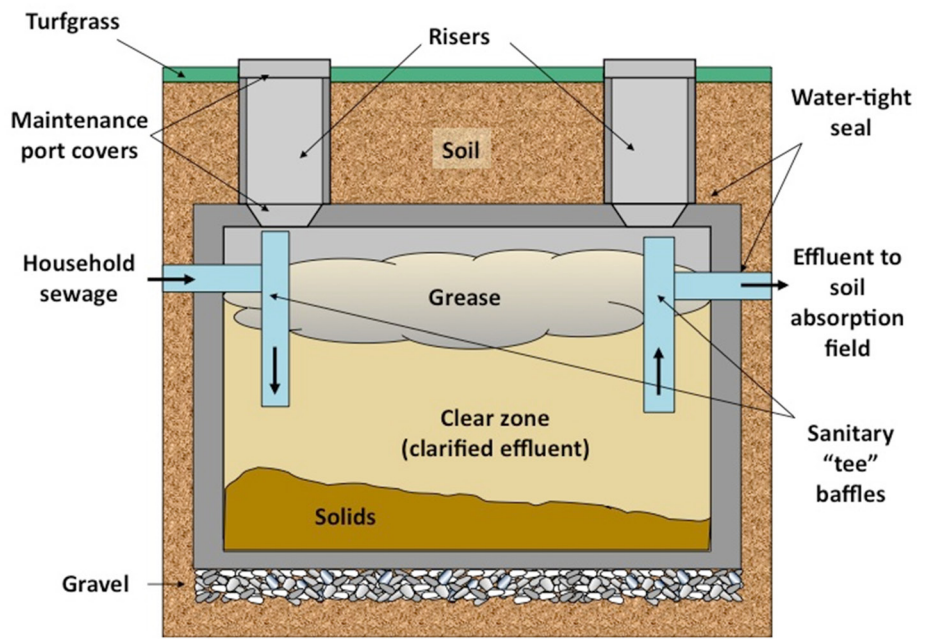


Figure 2. A cross-section view of a septic tank. Dense organic matter sinks while lighter wastewater components (grease and fats) float. The clarified effluent moves from the septic tank to the soil absorption field.

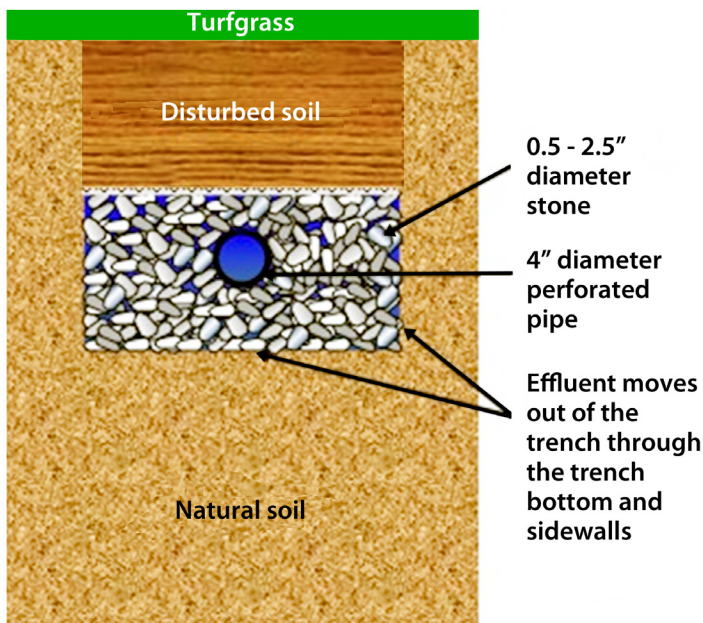


Figure 3. Cross-section of a conventional gravel trench, the most common type of septic system in the U.S.

Once in the soil, pathogens are removed from the wastewater by three general processes:

- Predation by other organisms that feed on the pathogens
- Adsorption of pathogens to soil particle surfaces
- Desiccation of pathogens in the oxygen-rich soil below the trenches

### Septic System Placement

An absorption field must be placed in a suitable area. The area must have limited vehicular and foot traffic before and after construction because parking, driving, and walking over the absorption field can compact the soil, which can cause the pipes in the trenches below to break or sag. Avoid planting shrubs or trees near or within the absorption field because large roots can plug or break the pipes. Also, never plant a vegetable garden over a soil absorption field due to food contamination risks.

## Caring for Your System

### Additives

There are numerous septic system additives on the market and manufacturers promote them as necessities for proper septic system function. But if properly designed and maintained, septic systems should not require additives.

### Cleaning

Over time, sludge and scum accumulate in the septic tank, limiting the area between the two layers for the clarified effluent. When that space becomes too small, solids may begin to moving out to the soil absorption field and restricting soil infiltration. To maintain adequate wastewater detention in the septic tank, hire

a professional to periodically remove the scum and sludge.

The time between cleanings depends on the amount of solids entering the system and the tank's size. But for most single-family home septic systems, tanks should be cleaned every three to five years.

**Table 1. Estimated septic tank inspection and cleaning frequency in years**

Tank size (gallons)	Number of people using septic system							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	8	
1000	12	6	3	3	2	2	1	
1250	16	8	4	3	3	2	1	
1500	19	9	6	4	3	3	2	

**Note:** More frequent cleaning needed if garbage disposal is used.

Source: Adapted from Mancl 1984.

Make sure the cleaner thoroughly removes all the sludge, effluent, and scum from the tank. Homeowners also should routinely remove and clean effluent screens every six to twelve months. Simply hose the solids back into the tank. If effluent screens plug up within a month or two, it is time to call the septic tank cleaner.



Figure 4. Septic tank located under deck being cleaned by professional. (Photo by Jeff Volenec)

## Be Careful about What Goes Down the Drain

Whatever homeowners dispose of in the household plumbing system ends up in the septic system and eventually in the environment. Excessive water use (whether from excessive laundering or inefficient water fixtures) can overload absorption fields and result in surface ponding of wastewater. Substances such as paint thinner, bleach, and motor oil poured into the wastewater stream can disrupt biological activity in the tank, clog up soil pores in the absorption field, and even contaminate groundwater sources in the area. (Table 2 includes common materials that should be prevented from entering septic systems, and their sources.)

### For more information

Visit the Home & Environment website for science-based information about your home and environment:

<http://www.ca.uky.edu/enri/henv/>

or

seeblue gogreen: <http://www.ca.uky.edu/gogreen/>

### References

Mancl, K.1984. Estimated septic tank pumping frequency. *J. Environ. Engineer.* 110:283-285.

#### About the author

Brad D. Lee, Water Quality Extension Specialist, Department of Plant and Soil Sciences

**Table 2. Disposable materials not suitable for septic systems.**

Kitchen	Bathroom	Laundry room	Garage
Oil	Pharmaceuticals	Powder laundry detergents	Fertilizers
Grease	Feminine products	Household cleaners	Pesticides
Large food particles	Non-biodegradable toilet paper	Large quantities of bleach	Paints or paint thinner
Coffee	Condoms	Arts and crafts remnants (e.g. glue)	Mechanical oil
Paper towels	Diapers	Cat litter	Gasoline
Cigarette butts	Dental floss	Lint	Solvents