

What you need to know about Septic Systems

Some people are under the impression that septic systems do not need to be pumped or serviced. Some people believe that adding "things" to the system will keep them from having to pump their systems. Some people don't even know they are on a septic system until it backs up into the home!

These are all real situations and comments that we have heard over the years.

What happens to our water?

One of the first things that we need to change is our idea on what a septic system is actually doing. The new state regulations adopted on July 1, 2013, now refers to septic systems as On-Site Wastewater Treatment Systems (OWTS). This was because when the original statute was adopted back in the 1950's the idea was just to get rid of or "dispose" of the sewage. We now know that we want to TREAT the water and return it back to the watershed and reuse it over and over again.

Research has found that the effluent that goes to the leach field (or now as it is call - Soil Treatment Area (STA)) eventually finds its way back into our ground water and is reused. Either in irrigating our crops or for our personal use, like drinking and bathing.

Now that you know this happens doesn't it make sense that we shouldn't just want to get rid of or "dispose" of the water, but that we would want to treat it so that when it reaches the ground water or other water source that it is as clean and free of pathogens and toxins as possible?

When you look at watersheds and where it goes and how many times water passes through the human body before it reaches the ocean it's amazing! They say that Colorado, or the Rocky Mountains, has the most pristine water! It hasn't passed through any "body" as of yet! We are the first time users of the water. Water in Florida and along any coast line has been "processed" or through the human body about 7 times before it reaches the ocean!

This is one of the reasons why the thoughts and ideas and approaches toward wastewater has changed.

We need to protect our very precious resource, water, and make sure that it is usable all the way down the line to the ocean.

Additives:

Additives are anything, and I mean ANYTHING, that someone intentionally adds to the system in an effort to "help" the system or to make it so they don't have to pump or service the system as often.

Some of the fun ones over the years have been - whole chicken (feathers and all), horse manure, cakes of yeast, baking soda & sugar, etc. There are a multitude of products that are offered at your local market, online or phone solicitors.

Just so you know, NONE of these products live up to the expectations of what is in the individual's mind about how they work or what they are doing. And actually in some cases have gone on to damage the system irreparably.

First, understand that a lot of the first products listed, chickens, yeast, etc. are all old wives tales. The old farmers thought these ones up and they generally have easy access to their favorite. What was really going on was they were probably looking for a way to "dispose" of whatever and thought, hmmm, maybe they'll help the septic and VOILA in they go!

The retail products are a little different. They, the manufacturers, have packaged "bacteria" or "enzymes" or both and tell you that they will help your system function.

The reality is that YOUR everyday waste puts all the bacteria and enzymes in the system that it needs to function. And that if you are having a problem with your bacteria or enzyme balance, all the "product" in the world is not going to "cure" your problem. The only thing that will fix your problem is understanding your "use habits" and changing them accordingly.

The biggest problem with these items is that people think by adding "the stuff" they do NOT have to pump their systems on a regular basis. It's a feel good product, "I'm taking care of my system by flushing

XYZ down the toilet, thereforebywhich, I don't need to pump my septic and look at all the money I have saved".

But, if you read the instructions on most of these products it states clearly that your system needs to be pumped and serviced on a regular basis - they don't say what regular basis is, only that it needs to be done.

Over the years we have seen just about every type of product out there and I can tell you with 100% certainty that there is no difference in the sludge and scum in a tank where people are using "products" to those that are NOT using "products".

You can identify the differences in types of paper used, how much they are using their garbage disposal, whether they are on heavy medications, whether they like fried foods or not, and a lot of other things, but you can't tell who has been using XYZ and who has not... I'm just sayin'!

Pump Frequency:

How often should I pump my system? The most asked question from a homeowner. Our answer, as often as you need to. Again, from before, the tank is designed to hold the solids. Pumping the tank removes the solids so that the effluent water going out into the tank is as clean as possible.

There are many, many factors that go into determining a pump schedule, but based on "normal" usage of a family of 4 it typically takes about 2-3 years for the build up of sludge and scum to necessitate pumping the tank. There are other factors that we can consider, like waste strength (basically what you are putting down your system), wastewater flows, etc. But for the layman, it's easiest to equate it to level of sludge and scum.

People who are very conscientious about what they are putting down their system will be able to extend the pumping interval. We have a family of 5 that we pump about every 6 years. And then of course we have the other extreme where we have a family of 2 that we do annually. The difference? The first family is very careful about what they put down the system, no garbage disposal, single ply toilet paper, etc. The second, well, let's just say they like to entertain and all, and I mean ALL, of the leftovers go down the garbage disposal!

So the key or answer to "how often should I pump my tank?" is as often as it needs to be!