

Maintaining Your Septic System

If you live in a rural area or have a weekend cabin far from municipal or county sewer systems, you most likely have a septic system buried somewhere on your property. Out of sight, and typically out of mind, this onsite sewage treatment facility may be the most overlooked and undervalued utilities of your home. With proper care and maintenance, septic systems can function for more than 25 to 30 years.

. A properly functioning septic system not only disposes of household wastewater, but prevents contamination of groundwater which can lead to pollution of local wells, streams, lakes, and ponds. Serious diseases can be caused by drinking water contaminated with bacteria and viruses from human waste. Nitrates and phosphates, also found in household wastewater can contribute to excessive algae growth in lakes and streams.

There are two main parts to the basic septic system: the septic tank and the drainfield or leachfield. Wastewater first flows into the septic tank where heavy solids settle to the bottom of the tank and light solids float to the top. Naturally occurring bacteria work on the solids to break them down. The separated wastewater is pushed into the drainfield where the soil acts as a natural filter to further treat it. Depending on the type of soil and space available, some septic systems do not have drainfields but have motorized aerators or ultraviolet light to help treat the wastewater.

Slow moving drains, unpleasant odors, and soggy lawns can be signs that the septic system needs attention. A regular inspection program and pumping of the septic tank can avoid inconvenient and costly repairs to the system. Local health departments in Ohio are now required to periodically inspect septic systems in their jurisdictions. Owners of septic systems

with motorized aerators must maintain a service contract with the motor manufacturer to help ensure the system operates properly. Most residential septic systems should be pumped out at least once every three years. A licensed septic-waste hauler can help determine when a system should be pumped out.

The first, and perhaps most important step in maintaining your septic system is knowing its location. A sketch of the septic system noting the location of the septic tank and drainfields on the property should be kept with important household papers. Nothing but grass should be planted over a drainfield and care should be used not to drive over the area.

Too much water can upset the delicate biological balance within the septic tank. Conserving water not only saves money, but helps the septic system function properly. Be careful of what is washed down drains and flushed into the sewer-line. A general rule of thumb is that nothing should be disposed of in a septic system that could just as easily be placed in the trash. Coffee grounds, table scraps, cooking fats, wet-strength towels, facial tissues, and excessive amounts of household chemicals are examples of things best kept out of a septic system.

For more information about septic systems, contact the Adams County Health Department at 937-544-5547.