HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

CARE OF SEPTIC SYSTEMS

Now, while it is not raining all the time, is the perfect time to think of care and feeding of a septic system.

According to the Florida Department of Health officials, nearly 1/3 of our state population is served by onsite sewage treatment and disposal systems commonly called septic systems. Though invisible most of the time, they can become unsightly, inconvenient and smelly if not cared for properly. They are especially troublesome during the rainy season when soils flood.

If you get a city water bill with a sewer charge, you are on a central community treatment system. However homes on lots larger than ½ acre in size may instead have a special individual treatment tank and drain field located underground near the house.

No matter which type of system you have, you can still have problems if you don’t pay attention to what is out of sight and down the drain.

A septic system is designed to let the soil and natural microbes in the soil treat and filter wastes and water on the property so the underground water supply does not get polluted. This is a natural biological process. However, there is a concern that septic tanks may be a source of nutrient contamination, such as nitrogen, getting into our lakes and streams.

Wastewater is produced through washing, bathing, doing laundry, cooking, cleaning, and flushing toilets. It is estimated that about 40 to 50 gallons of wastewater are produced by each of us each day.

Officials of Osceola County Health Department determine the size tank needed as well as the size of the drain field to allow proper filtering and function of the system. Proper design and installation are important to keep the plumbing working.

Soil drainage and the depth to water in the ground, called the water table, determines the proper drain field size as well as the elevation of the tank and drain field. Elevated septic tanks create noticeable mounds in yards and depending on the year the house was built and the specific regulations in place at the time, houses in a neighborhood may have septic tanks at several different elevations.

Realize they are elevated for a reason. Water flows downhill and if there is not a downhill outside your house, the water in your house won’t leave and all the mess stays inside, toilets don’t flush and showers don’t drain.

When you buy or rent your home, there is usually a booklet to help you understand how your dishwasher or oven works. Rarely is there information on how to care for your septic system. These hints should reduce problems and help you avoid costly repairs when you least expect them.

Don’t flush it if it hasn’t been eaten. No feminine products, no matter what the package says. Don’t put leftovers down the drain. Bacteria decompose fine, partially digested food best. Don’t use a garbage disposal, or use it sparingly if you have a septic system. No paper towels, newspaper, or toys get flushed. No grease, oil, or fat should be poured down the drain.

Water conservation indoors reduces wastewater to be disposed of outside. Take quick showers. Fix dripping faucets or leaky toilets to avoid excess water entering the system. Spread the interval between loads of laundry over several days instead of having a "wash day." This allows the wastewater to move through the system slowly. If purchasing a new dishwasher or washing machine, select ENERGY STAR rated models that conserve water while saving energy.

Use chemical cleaners sparingly and don’t pour waste chemicals such as paints or solvents, down the drain. Dispose of them at our county solid waste recycling drop of locations.
Enzymes and special additives are not needed to make your septic system work. All the good bacteria you need are present in our own bodies and we pass it along to the septic system whenever we flush the toilet.

Don’t drive over or pave over the drain field. Don’t plan trees in the area as the roots can clog the system and slow the flow.

It is recommended to have your tank inspected every 3 to 5 years. The best time to schedule it is when you don’t have an emergency. Avoid surprises when summer rains arrive. Take care of your septic system now.

Woods Walks help you learn more about our soils and natural plant and wildlife interactions. Join me for a guided nature walk on Thursday, February 2 at 8:30 AM.

Jennifer Welshans, UF/IFAS horticulture faculty, is having a free class on recommended plants for Osceola County landscapes at 1 PM on February 8. Call Cindy at 321-697-3000 for details on either program.

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