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Ask the Contractor: Words of wisdom on subject of septic



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Concerns were abundant and plentiful, as they say with words of wisdom, a few weeks ago on the use of the garbage disposal this holiday season. With lots of family and friends visiting, and sewer systems being overly used, we have had several calls these past weeks with septic issues. So as with the garbage disposal, here are some words of wisdom on septic systems.

Most of us are conscientious about the care and maintenance of our vehicles. Oil and filter changes plus other periodic inspections help protect the investment but what are you doing to protect your onsite wastewater system? Your onsite wastewater system is the least expensive utility monthly compared to electric, gas, water, etc., however, replacing one of the components of your system can add up.

In Arizona, one in five homes has an onsite wastewater system to treat their wastewater.

Onsite wastewater systems include both conventional septic systems and alternate septic systems. A septic system has three parts: a separation process, the disposal, and the soil under the disposal. Each system should effectively accept and treat waste water from your home.

The most common type of system consists of a conventional septic tank that separates the solids from the effluent, and then releases the effluent by gravity to the disposal for final treatment. Also, there are advanced technology treatment systems (alternate); alternate systems are used when soil conditions do not allow for the use of a conventional septic system. There are 20 different types of alternative systems approved for use in Arizona.

The septic tank provides the first step in the treatment process; it separates the solids from the effluent and keeps the solids from clogging up the disposal of the system. The solids separate out into two different layers — the lighter solids will float to the top and form the “scum” layer, the heavier solids will sink to the bottom and form the “sludge” level. Each of these levels will be broken down by about 40 percent due to the microorganisms that naturally occur in the waste stream.

All standard septic systems, and most alternative systems, must be cleaned on a regular basis; cleaning frequency depends on tank size and usage. (See Figure 1.)

Tank Size	1		2		3		4		5	
	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2
1000	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
1200	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
1400	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
1600	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
1800	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
2000	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
2200	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
2400	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
2600	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
2800	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
3000	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

When you have a service professional out to clean your tank(s), be sure they open all access openings of the tank. Most tanks have two compartments, however, a few older tanks have only one compartment. Refer to your manufacturer’s manual on an alternate system for the recommended cleaning and service schedule. For alternate systems, it is recommended to have a service contract in

place to help keep your system in working order. **BE AWARE:** A malfunctioning (or inadequate) septic system can negatively affect your property’s value and could pose legal liability consequences.

In Yavapai County, septic tanks installed 2001 and newer are required to be installed with an effluent filter on the outlet. The effluent filter is an extra barrier to help prevent solids from entering the disposal area; effluent filters may be installed in older tanks to bring them up to code. If there is a filter installed in your system, cleaning is recommended on a regular basis, every 6-12 months, depending on usage.

The final part of the system is the disposal area. The disposal is where the effluent from the separation process is treated. In a standard disposal, the effluent seeps out a perforated pipe into gravel or crushed rock bed, then travels to the soil. Through a biological process, soil will remove harmful bacteria, viruses, and toxic organic material.

There are several alternate disposal types from evapotranspiration beds, engineered pad systems (Eljen), to constructed wetlands, and several more. Each processes the effluent

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in a different manner, but each type working properly will protect ground water supply from contamination. A service contract is recommended to help keep your alternate system in working order.

When you have an onsite wastewater treatment system, there are items that you do not want to flush, including but not limited to: coffee grounds, dental floss, disposable diapers, baby wipes/facial tissues, sanitary napkins/feminine hygiene products, condoms, cigarette butts, fats, grease, or oil. Also do not flush chemicals, including but not limited to: paints, varnishes, thinners/solvents, anti-freeze, photographic solutions, pesticides/herbicides, prescriptions, and over-the-counter medication.

A few warning signs of a malfunctioning system: slow draining/ gurgling toilets and/or household drains; sewage backing up into house; sewage odors — inside or outside; sewage over or near the disposal; lush, green growth over the disposal; and/or damp, soggy, wet soil over or near the disposal. A service professional will be able to help you diagnose your system and recommend a method to get your system back to normal.

Many commercial septic tank additives (biological or chemical) claim to keep septic systems healthy, stimulate bacterial action, avoid system upsets ... some infer that you won't have to pump the tank. Many onsite industry authorities are skeptical! Additives have not been proven to improve long term system performance. CONSENSUS: Additives will not eliminate the need for timely pumping of the septic tank.

Water conservation is critical to the operation of your septic system and to reduce risk of failure. Consider the following tips:

- 1 — Modern high efficiency toilets can dramatically cut water usage;
- 2 — Faucet aerators and shower head restrictors can further reduce water use;
- 3 — Use common sense water conserving practices; and
- 4 — Closely monitor and repair leaks from fixtures. A leaky toilet can add up to 200 gallons per day to your disposal area causing unnecessary failure.

REMINDER: A person who plans to sell (or otherwise transfer) a property served by an onsite system is required, by law, to engage a Certified Inspector to perform a pre-transfer inspection of the septic system. Arizona Department of Environmental Quality is the state agency that governs the regulations for onsite systems.

Following are resources for information:

JT's Septic: www.jtseptic.com — JT's will present information about septic systems to homeowner associations, real estate offices and other interested parties and answer and consumer questions.

ADEQ: www.adeq.org

National Association of Wastewater Transporters: www.nawt.org

City of Prescott: www.prescott-az.gov — Homeowner's Manual Septic Systems 101

If your property has a septic system, you can request your property record file including copies of your system's permitting documents and plot plan by emailing Yavapai County at development.services.requests@co.yavapai.us. Include your parcel number and physical address.

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