

Can I Plant on the Septic Field?

By Susan Camp

When you choose to live in a rural area, issues arise that you won't find in city or suburban development living. According to the Gloucester County website, water service is provided to approximately 4500 accounts and sewer service to about 1300 accounts. That means the rest of us have wells and septic systems. Homeowners bear the responsibility to maintain their septic systems in order to keep them operating safely to protect the health of county residents and the environment.

A septic system separates solid from liquid waste. The traditional inground and the newer mound systems work in much the same way. Solid wastes accumulate in the tank, which must be pumped at intervals to prevent overflow of septic sludge into the drain field. The liquids flow from the tank through drain lines that allow the wastewater to percolate gradually into the soil, where soil microorganisms filter the water to destroy harmful bacteria and help prevent pollution of ground water. Septic drain fields, sometimes called leach fields, are safe if properly maintained. Residents have no reason to fear disease caused by harmful microbes if the system is working properly.

New homeowners often ask "Should we plant in the drain field and, if so, what should we plant?" Septic drain fields benefit from plant cover to help prevent erosion, improve oxygen exchange, and remove moisture from the soil. The easiest and most effective planting is either turf grass or weeds. Tall ornamental grasses with large root clumps are not recommended. Herbaceous perennials and annuals that are adaptable to dry conditions are desirable, as they have shallow roots that will not interfere with the filtering of wastewater. Bulbs are appropriate, as well. Septic fields should not be irrigated or tilled.

The roots of large shrubs and trees are likely to damage septic fields and drain lines. Willow, silver and red maple, and birch trees should be avoided. Dogwood and crabapple trees cause less damage, as do boxwood and holly. Sunlight is crucial to optimal performance of the drain field, so trees and bushes must be pruned regularly to keep them from shading the septic field.

Another point to remember when deciding what to plant over the septic field is that most household cleaning products that are dumped down the drain are alkaline, having a pH of 7.0 or higher. Plants that require a more acidic soil may not thrive in that environment. Salt used in a home water-softening system will leach into the soil, so plants must be salt-tolerant.

A final question related to septic fields is whether or not it is safe to plant vegetables in the drain field. If the homeowner could guarantee that the septic system is always performing optimally, it would be safe. No one can guarantee that level of performance, so it is safer to plant vegetables and small fruits away from the septic field. Root crops like carrots or beets should never be planted in the drain field. Lettuce and leafy greens can become contaminated by water splashing

up from the field when it rains. Tomatoes and cucumbers planted in a septic field should be tied up off the ground. Finally, raised beds should not be placed in drain fields, as the extra layer of soil will prevent evaporation of moisture.

For more information on planting in septic drain fields, Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 426-617 offers general information. Clemson University Cooperative Extension HGIC 1726 includes extensive lists of plants appropriate for planting in drain fields, most of which grow well throughout the southeast. The University of Nevada fact Sheet 07 32 presents explanations of inground and mound septic systems and a helpful diagram of a septic drain field.

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