

Fun Facts: Your Septic System Questions Answered

Last month as a part of our SepticSmart celebration, we invited the public to ask questions about their septic systems of our experts. This month, we feature answers to some of the most common questions:

Q1: Does greywater (from sinks, showers and washing machines) result in the septic system discharging more pollutants by reducing the efficiency of the system? Would diverting the greywater to other systems make septic systems more efficient?

A1: A properly designed, installed and functioning on-site wastewater system is engineered to dispose of black and greywater without discharging pollutants or compromising treatment. The diversion of greywater may actually adversely impact the function and performance on an on-site system, and threaten the system's effectiveness. Here is a good article that explains further: http://www.onsiteinstaller.com/editorial/2014/09/will_an_explosion_in_graywater_reuse_threaten_septic_system_effectiveness

In drought-stricken areas of the country many people are promoting greywater diversion and reuse of the water. Systems designed to divert greywater can be high maintenance and require treatment of the greywater prior to use, even if it is used for irrigation. Technologies designed for arid areas of the country are not necessarily practical in the northeast where annual rainfall, groundwater levels and soils need to be considered. The best way to avoid inefficient treatment of on-site septic system discharge is to learn more about the proper care and maintenance of your system. EPA's [SepticSmart program](#) provides homeowners with valuable information on how to be SepticSmart.

Q2: There are times when my plumbing has poor drainage and I detect a faint septic odor. I have my septic tank pumped regularly. Is this to be expected?

A2: Having your septic tank pumped may not be getting to the cause of the problem. Do you stagger the use of water generating appliances or have leaky fixtures? Does your problem occur after a group gathering or significant rain event? Physical damage to the drainfield caused by landscape plantings, cars, livestock or other heavy objects may have caused damage to your drainfield. If you have an innovative/alternative system you may have mechanical parts, filters, distribution lines and vents that need to be maintained or replaced. Septic tank effluent filters can become clogged and slow the plumbing in the house, and need to be periodically cleaned. The

filters protect your drainfield from solids leaving the tank. Protect your drainfield, clean and do not discard the filters!

Water being diverted to the drainfield from a sump pump, rain gutters or surface water will negatively impact your leachfield. Perhaps the drainfield has come to the end of its expected life. EPA's [SepticSmart](#) program provides home owners with valuable information to learn more about their system. A qualified Licensed Designer or Service Provider may need to inspect your system to help you identify any problems that should be addressed to avoid having your septic fail.

Q3: How do I know when to pump my septic tank and when is the best time?

A3: A typical septic tank should be inspected at least every three years and your tank pumped as recommended by the inspector (generally every three to five years). Four major factors influence the frequency of septic pumping: household size, total wastewater generated, volume of solids in wastewater, and septic tank size. The tank should be pumped if the sludge layer has built up to within 25%-33% of the liquid capacity of the tank. A [Table](#) is available to help estimate septic tank inspection and pumping frequency in years. Variables to be considered are also identified.

Your septic tank may not have an access riser to grade and may be difficult to locate and access once there is snow cover or the ground is frozen. A winter service call should be avoided if possible. EPA's [Homeowner's Guide to Septic Systems](#) has several useful tips including what you need to know before the service provider arrives.

Q4: My drainfield is sometimes wet and has spongy grass. Is this to be expected?

A4: The drainfield (leachfield) is an important part of your septic system that removes contaminants from the liquid that emerges from your septic tank. Drainfields are designed to prevent wastewater from surfacing. Call a septic professional if you notice any of the following: bright green spongy grass on the drainfield; wastewater backing up into household drains; pooling water or muddy soil around your septic system or in your basement or a strong odor around the septic tank and drainfield. Simply pumping the septic tank may not be the solution to your problem. To learn more about your septic system and what questions to ask your designer or pumper, visit EPA's [SepticSmart website](#). Contact the Drinking Water & Groundwater Protection Division Regional Office staff with questions about your septic system. A State of Vermont [Regional Office Map](#) provides office, program and contact information for each of the five regional offices that permit potable water and wastewater systems.

Q5: Are septic tank additives helpful?

A5: According to the U.S. EPA you should be aware of septic additives! Some manufacturers of septic tank additives claim their products break down septic tank sludge in order to eliminate the need for pumping. This may allow suspended solids and scum intended to remain in the septic tank to proceed through the tank and clog the soils. The effectiveness of additives has not been determined; in fact, many studies show that additives have no significant effects on the tank's bacterial populations.

Septic tanks already contain the microbes they need for the effective breakdown of household wastewater pollutants. Periodic pumping is the only true way to ensure that septic systems work properly and provide many years of service. EPA's [SepticSmart](#) program provides home owners with valuable information to learn more about their system.