

Community Horticulture Fact Sheet #98 Planting over a Septic System

People with an on-site sewage system often have questions about what can be planted over their septic drainfield. "Landscaping Your Septic System," a brochure from Washington SeaGrant covers the basics to help in planning. Many of the tips in this fact sheet are drawn from the brochure.

First, get basic information about the septic system location, functioning and maintenance requirements. Understanding the system is vital to making choices about incorporating the drain field into the landscape. WSU Cooperative Extension and the Washington State Department of Health collaborated on a series of brochures about septic systems. They explain how to manage a normal gravity flow drainfield, a pressure distribution system, a mound system and a sand filter system.

To get the brochure "Landscaping Your Septic System" and other resources on septic systems, send a self-addressed, stamped, business-size envelope to: Teri King, Washington SeaGrant Program, PO Box 488, Shelton, Washington, 98584. The publications are also available on their web site at www.wsg.washington.edu. For WSU publications, visit or call your local county Cooperative Extension office.

Most standard septic tanks separate solids from liquids and allow the liquid effluent to gradually trickle into the soil. Beneficial microbes attack this effluent and cleanse it of harmful bacteria, so that it can eventually enter the water table. The soil microbes require oxygen to perform their functions

best and do not work as well in saturated or compacted soils. Landscape designs must minimize frequent traffic across the drainfield, so that soil does not become compacted. It's certainly fine to mow or walk across it occasionally, but a heavily used path shouldn't traverse the drainfield area. Newer systems will have both an active drainfield and a reserve area; if the system needs repair or replacement, the reserve area would be used while repairs proceed. Know where both of these are located and the dimensions of each.

When designing the landscape, remember to allow access for regular checking of the septic tank, the pump tank and the drainfield itself. Don't plan construction that interferes with the drainfield, which could compact the soil or, worse yet, could damage the tank or pipes. During rainy weather, the drainfield receives more water than normal. Direct roof downspouts or other water channels such as swales away from the drainfield area. Place irrigation systems so that the added water stops at least 10 feet from the edge of the septic system.

Many drainfield owners cover the septic area with bark, gravel, patio blocks in sand, or plastic. "Landscaping Your Septic System" suggests using plants rather than any of these materials. Remember the need for oxygen in the soil? Living plants help in oxygen exchange and in removing water from the area. None of the other materials do this.

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To get started, determine the extent of the area and mark the access points for future maintenance. A bird bath or piece of garden art might be a handy reminder of where to dig when maintenance time eventually comes.

Now, what plants work best over these areas? Deep-rooted plants or plants that develop invasive root systems aren't advisable. Avoid trees and large shrubs on top of the drain field. Vegetable gardens require frequent digging and foot traffic, so aren't recommended. In addition, sewage effluent is distributed throughout the drain field and, as the brochure notes, "Root vegetables planted in this area may be directly exposed to septic tank effluent."

Not surprisingly, grasses get top rating for use on top of drain fields. Many of you may already have a lawn or casual meadow across the field. Grasses have shallow roots and can be low maintenance. An ideal choice might be one of the grass and broadleaf plant mixtures sold as "EcoTurf" or "Fleur de Lawn." These mixes contain grasses and flower components like yarrow, chamomile, and clover. They generally need infrequent watering in summer and provide visual interest when in bloom. Check your local nurseries for these mixes.

Smaller ornamental grasses such as festucas also work. Many of these change color in fall and provide winter interest with tan and brown leaves. *Festuca ovina* 'Glauca' (blue fescue) grows 4 to 10 inches tall and takes either sun or semi-shade. Ornamental grasses take little maintenance. Prune them back to the crown in early spring, just before new growth begins. Most of them tolerate summer dry conditions. Ribbon grass (*Phalaris arundinacea* 'Picta') and quaking grass (*Briza media*) are low growers that could serve well and provide cuttings for fall flower arrangements. Avoid very tall grasses such as Oriental foundation grass (*Pennisetum orientale*.) A combination of turf and beds of ornamental grasses would be entirely suitable to the situation.

Other ground covers and shallow-rooted perennials could also be used. Don't use extremely aggressive plants. English ivy, the common *Hedera helix*, shouldn't be planted anywhere in western Washington, because it has become a pestiferous weed in forests and parks. Ajuga and its hybrids or any of the smaller vincas (*Vinca minor*) would fill in rapidly. Thyme also makes a lovely ground cover.

Shallow-rooted flowers may be used if they can survive with little or no irrigation. Besides yarrow and chamomile, mentioned above, you might try sweet alyssum, nasturtiums, thrift (*Armeria*), pinks (*Dianthus*), wallflowers (*Erysimum*), portulaca, sedum & sempervivums.

In a sunny spot, small bulbs like crocus and small daffodils could be planted among the ground covers, because they are quite shallow rooted and disappear completely in summer time.

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