

SHORE STEWARDS NEWS

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Septic System Care Is Up To You

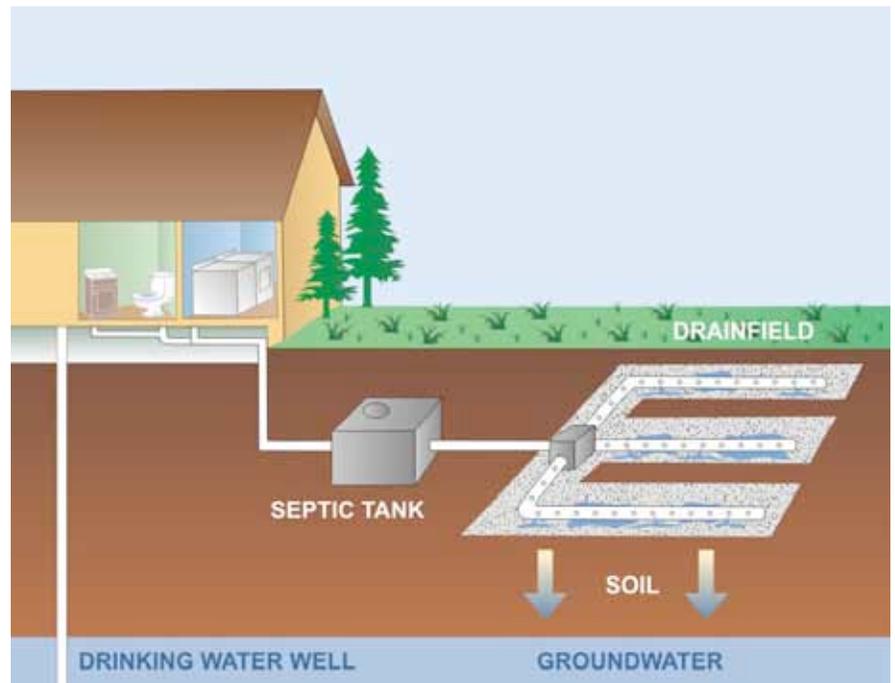
Do you ever wonder what happens to waste after you flush the toilet, wash your hands, rinse dishes in your kitchen sink, or launder clothes? For the majority of Island County residents, their underground septic systems take care of this waste. Fully functioning septic systems treat waste and sewage before it discharges to our surface or groundwater. A failing septic system can be expensive to repair and is a serious health risk to your family and pets, as well as contaminating our waters. By practicing proper septic

How Does my Septic System Work?

Every type of septic system is composed of a septic tank and drainfield. In the simplest form, wastewater from your household flows into the septic tank. In the tank, heavy solids settle to the bottom and form a layer of sludge. Grease and light solids float to the top and form a scum layer. As more wastewater enters the septic tank, the separated, liquid wastewater in the middle layer of the tank flows to the drainfield. Microorganisms living in the soil in the drainfield clean the wastewater by consuming harmful bacteria and viruses before it seeps into groundwater.

The sludge and scum layers remain in the tank where naturally-occurring "good" bacteria work to break them down. Since the bacteria cannot completely decompose them, the layers continue to grow, slowly filling up the tank. These layers will eventually need to be pumped out by a knowledgeable expert. Pumping frequency depends on household habits and personal routines.

There are many types of septic systems. If you don't know what type of system you have, or where it is located on your property, contact Island County Public Health for a copy of your septic "as-built". This is what was filed with the county when your system was installed. On Whidbey, phone (360) 679-7350. On Camano, phone (360) 387-3443.



Quick Tips to Extend the Life of a Septic System

There are many ways septic system users can keep their septic systems healthy and avoid expensive repairs. You can reduce the need for pumping and lengthen the longevity and performance of your system with septic system friendly household practices:

- Compost food waste instead of using the garbage disposal
- Avoid flushing products that may clog the drainfield (hair, cat litter, facial tissues, feminine hygiene products, cigarette butts, etc)
- Reduce and control water use to reduce the flow of wastewater into your system (spacing out laundry and dishwashing loads to once per day, fixing leaking sinks or toilets, using water-efficient washers and showerheads).

Adopt measures to maintain the actual equipment:

- Arrange for a licensed and certified inspector to examine the tank *at least* every three years for gravity and simple pump systems; annually for most other systems. You can do this yourself if you complete the appropriate county HOST training, much of which is online: <http://www.islandcounty.net/health/liquid/HOST.htm>
- Plant trees and shrubs no closer than 30' from your drainfield, as roots can spread and invade the system.
- Become familiar with your system: Learn about the type of system you have and suggested maintenance schedule
- Keep inspection and maintenance records
- Additives to “boost function” are not recommended and can actually do more harm than good.

Additionally, there are several ways to protect the drainfield:

- Do not allow stormwater and roof runoff to saturate the drainfield
- Keep sprinkler and irrigation systems away from the area
- Keep patios, driveways, sheds, gardens, play equipment, and livestock off the drainfield.
- Inspect your drainfield for odors, wet spots, or emergent sewage.

Landscaping Your Drainfield

Yes, it is possible to landscape your drainfield! Most drainfields are covered with 6 – 12” of topsoil, so there are options, as long as the plants are shallow rooted! There are guidelines to follow in order to protect your drainfield.



First, remember that the soil should not be compacted, as this could decrease the bacteria in the soil and the ability for water to percolate. This means the drainfield should not have a structure built on it nor should cars be driven on it or parked on it. Livestock, over time, can also compact the soil.

Second, the drainfield should not be saturated, so do not install plants that require watering. Instead, consider planting ornamental grasses, shallow-rooting flowers, ferns, and ground cover. Some big grasses, like any Bamboo and Pampas Grass can harm septic drainfields. Low-maintenance plants prevent soil compaction and water

saturation while adding natural beauty to your drainfield. Never plant vegetable plants on it. Fortunately, there are a many recommended plant species, with a few listed below:

Deep Shade Plants	Partial Shade/Sun Plants	Sun Plants
Japanese Spurge	Blue Star Creeper	Kinnikinnick
Irish Moss	Vaccinium Well's Delight	Blue Oat Grass
Wintergreen	Creeping Rubus	Vaccinium Well's Delight
Sword Fern	Sword Fern	Blue-silver fescue

When installing plants, limit topsoil additions to only one to two inches, consider using seeds or small starts, and also be aware of signs of septic system failure. A grass lawn is perfectly acceptable for planting over a drainfield.

How Do I Know if My System Failed?

Stop, look, and smell! The most obvious septic system failures leave clues that are easy to spot. Check for pooling of water or muddy soil around your septic tank or drainfield. Check for odors of sewage or a "rotten egg" smell around your septic system. You may even notice this odor in your basement. Notice if your sink or toilet backs up when you flush or do laundry. Look for lush green grass over your drainfield, even during dry weather. Check with your local health district or a septic system professional. If you would like to get really familiar with your site, you can check out a video on how to inspect your system on the Island County Health District website at <http://www.islandcounty.net/health/liquid/HOST.htm>.

References and Resources

Washington Department of Ecology. (2010). *Water quality: Septic*. Retrieved September 10, 2010 from <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wq/wqguide/septic.html>

Washington Sea Grant: Download publications on septic system maintenance and care, *landscaping your drainfield*, pumping your septic system and more: <http://www.wsg.washington.edu/>

Upcoming Events

Wednesday, October 27th, 7:00 pm: *About the Seafood We Eat.* Camano Center (the blue building), 141 N. East Camano Drive, Camano Island. As part of the Beach Watchers 4th Wednesday Speaker Series, come hear Pete Granger of the U.W. Sea Grant Program talk about seafood.

You can learn where the seafood you eat in local restaurants and buy in local food stores comes from; how it is caught; the difference between farmed and wild seafood; and which fish are harvested locally.

This program is free to the public. No preregistration is required. Sponsored by WSU Island County Beach Watchers. For more info, contact tskorheim@wavecable.com.

Attend a FREE Septic 101 Workshop!

Come learn how to properly care for your system, including:

- What everyday maintenance tips can prevent /8thousands of dollars worth of repairs?
 - How does my septic system work?
 - How do I know when to pump my system?
 - What should I ask from my septic system service provider to ensure a complete inspection?



Date and Time: Saturday, Oct. 9th, 9:30 am – 11:00 am

Location: Camano Senior and Community Center, 606 Arrowhead Road, Camano Island.

Register Today! www.islandcounty.net/health/liquid/host.htm, or call Janet Hall at (360) 678-7974 (On Camano: 629-4522, ext 7974)

This product is funded by the Island County Marine Resources Committee and the Northwest Straits Commission. You can view the Marine Resources Committee website at www.islandcountymrc.org The website for the Northwest Straits Commission can be seen at <http://www.nwstraits.org/>



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If you would like to download or view previous Shore Steward newsletters, please visit www.shorestewards.wsu.edu/island/ newsletter. Your Shore Stewards Coordinator is Scott Chase, (360) 387-3443, ext 258, or email at shorestewards@wsu.edu .