

Septic Tanks, Buried And Forgotten

Owners or buyers of homes with septic tanks need to be extra vigilant, because it's one house system that even professional home inspectors sometimes can't judge accurately. It doesn't lend itself for poking around to test its age or condition!

A septic waste system is simple enough to understand. Waste from sinks, toilets, laundry tubs and dishwashers, instead of flowing through sewer pipes to a municipal treatment facility, flows into a tank located not far from the house.

Solid waste is collected in the tank and eventually has to be pumped out and hauled away. The liquid waste seeps into the surrounding ground, usually through a system of perforated pipes. Bacteria that live in the soil digest the septic material and render it harmless, so it doesn't normally contaminate the ground or nearby wells.

But, in time, even a well-maintained septic system will clog up and have to be replaced. And, in the meantime, lots of things can go wrong.

A common problem is damaged pipes from vehicles being driven over the septic bed area – which sometimes occurs when homeowners aren't exactly sure where the pipes are located. For the same reason, sometimes these septic beds are partly or completely paved over.

The area can also be flooded by surface runoff or just too much rain from nearby roofs. When this happens, the normal bacterial action doesn't take place and raw liquid waste saturates the area or flows over the surface.

Additives that claim to extend the life of septic systems can generate so much biological activity in the tank that solids no longer settle to the bottom, ending up in the surrounding soil along with the liquid.

A danger you might not think of is rusting steel septic tank covers, which can collapse or allow highly toxic gas to escape. These conditions result in occasional deaths throughout North America. Other parts of the steel tanks can rust, allowing solids to contaminate the ground.

It's not easy to inspect a septic system. Sometimes the current owner has no idea of what type of system is in the ground or when it was last pumped out. A search of maintenance records or municipal plans may help in these cases.

A visual inspection of the adjacent area can reveal clues about the condition of a septic system. Trained inspectors look for odors, unusual growth, green stripes that mirror the location of the leaching pipes, or even soggy sewage erupting at the surface.

Sometimes flushing a dye down the toilet with plenty of water can indicate problems if the dye shows up anywhere around the property, including nearby streams and storm drains. A system with a big problem may show signs of the dye in 20 minutes; a system with a small problem may not show signs for up to five days. Unfortunately, this type of test cannot be performed on all types of septic systems.

Evidence of recent excavation, which may indicate a repair or pumpout, means that someone may be able to provide valuable information.

