

# Smart Septic Advice & Water Wise Ideas

A joint initiative of the *Friends of Stoco Lake* and the *Municipality of Tweed*

Whether you have a private septic system or are connected to the municipal sewer system that takes your wastewater to the lagoon, the ideas suggested below will help protect and improve the quality of ground and surface water in our municipality.

## Why do I need to maintain my septic system?

- **To protect drinking water**

Improperly treated wastewater from your septic system can contaminate your well water, causing serious illnesses such as *E. coli* infections.

- **To protect surface water quality**

If you live close to creeks, rivers or lakes, a poorly maintained septic system may pollute them, affecting the health of fish and wildlife, and resulting in unpleasant odours and algae blooms.

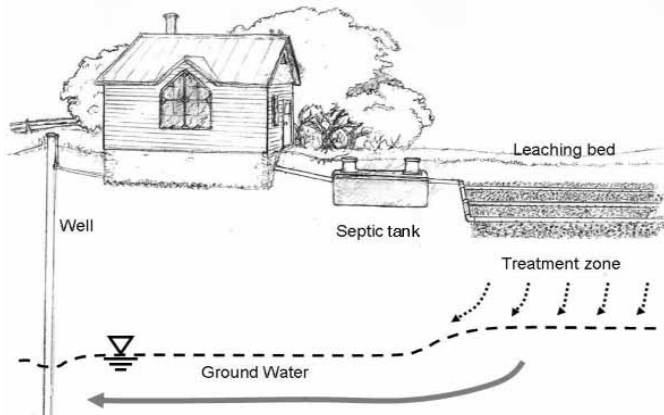
- **Delayed repairs are expensive**

It's cheaper to regularly pump and maintain your septic system (\$150-200) than to have it repaired or replaced (up to \$10,000) due to neglect. Most costly septic problems are completely preventable. A well-maintained septic system should last 30 years or more.

- **To increase the property value of your home**

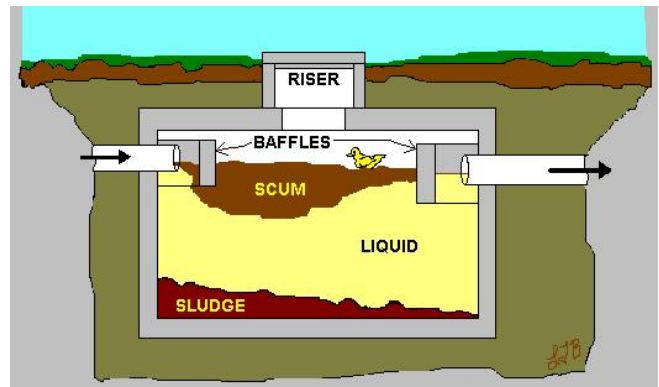
A septic system in good working order is an attractive feature of any home.

## What does a septic system do? How does it work?



Credit: Éric Brunet, Ontario Rural Wastewater Centre – University of Guelph

A well-maintained septic system effectively removes and treats household wastewater before releasing it back into the groundwater. With the help of naturally-occurring bacteria, wastewater separates into layers in the septic tank. Sludge (solids) settles to the bottom, with effluent (liquids) in the middle and an oil-like layer of scum on top. When effluent rises to the level of the septic tank outflow pipe, it enters the leaching bed and treatment zone. Effluent is then distributed throughout the soil of the leaching bed by perforated pipes. Soil absorbs the effluent, while bacteria living in the soil filter out any remaining harmful materials.



## What are my responsibilities?

- Depending on tank capacity, level of use, and the number of people in your household, solids need to be pumped out of your septic system every 1 to 5 years.
- Have regular inspections with pump-outs to ensure optimal septic system performance.
- Test your well water frequently for signs of bacterial contamination from septic malfunctioning. It's free! Contact the Health Unit (see contact information at the end of this document).
- Detailed septic system owner guidelines and regulations are outlined in the Ontario Building Code (Part 8), available through the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing ([www.mah.gov.on.ca](http://www.mah.gov.on.ca)) or the Municipality of Tweed (613 478 2535 / [www.twp.tweed.on.ca](http://www.twp.tweed.on.ca)).

## Warning signs!

The following signs indicate a problem with your septic system:

- Slower drains (sinks, toilets, showers, etc.)
- Sewage back-up
- Surfacing "grey water" or raw sewage outside
- Wet leaching bed
- Sulphur smell
- Exposed pipes
- Uneven plant growth around the leaching bed

*If you have any of these signs, contact a septic system contractor right away. Septic problems pose serious health hazards for you, your family and the environment.*

## What can I do to make a difference?

Here are suggested ideas – some “do’s and ‘don’t’s” – to make your septic system more effective, reduce the strain on the municipal lagoon system, and improve environmental quality!

### Do...

- ...Use biodegradable, environmentally friendly laundry and dishwasher detergents, cleaners, soaps, shampoos, etc.
- ...Repair leaky faucets and toilets
- ...Be conscious of wasteful running of water, for example when brushing your teeth, doing the dishes, or having a shower
- ...Install water-conserving devices such as low-flush toilets and low-flow showerheads and faucets
- ...Spread your laundry over the week, rather than doing several loads in one day
- ...Have lint traps on washing machines and removable hair baskets in drains
- ...Direct water run-off from roofs and upward slopes away from the septic leaching bed
- ...Maintain a healthy (chemical-free) grass cover over the septic leaching bed to absorb moisture and prevent soil erosion
- ...Know where your septic system is located
- ...Regularly pump and maintain your septic system
- ...Keep a record of septic pump-outs and maintenance

### Don't...

- ...Overload your septic system with high volumes of water (wastewater solids require time to naturally settle; overloading can force raw sewage to the surface in your yard)
- ...If you live in town, connect your sump pump and eavestroughs or downspouts to the sewer!
- ...Rely on organic “septic additives” (this is not recommended, nor does it replace regular pumping)
- ...Wait for signs of septic system failure to begin regular pumping and maintenance
- Some activities can compact soil, reduce accessibility for pumping and maintenance, and destroy pipes. *Don't* do the following on top of your septic system!
  - construct buildings
  - drive or park heavy machinery or vehicles
  - water the grass (this can over-saturate soils, leading to the formation of puddles consisting of septic tank effluent & water)
  - plant trees or shrubs
  - cover with asphalt or concrete
- Septic systems and lagoons are designed to work with nature. Chemicals seriously upset or kill beneficial bacteria that enable them to function well. Drain-clogging substances such as food, laundry lint, paper towels and oils reduce the capacity of these systems to work efficiently. So *don't* put the following down your household drains:
  - chemicals (pesticides, harsh cleaners, thinners, solvents, paints, etc.)
  - antibacterial soaps and cleaners
  - coffee grounds, food from garbage garburators, hair, paper towels, cigarette butts
  - dental floss, sanitary napkins, tampons, disposable diapers, condoms
  - fats, grease, oils
- ...Ever enter a septic system without proper ventilation – leave this to the experts (septic gases can be fatal!)

## Where can I find additional information?

Municipality of Tweed  
613 478 2535  
[www.twp.tweed.on.ca](http://www.twp.tweed.on.ca)

Hastings & Prince Edward Counties Health Unit  
(drinking water testing, well water advice and tips)  
613 966 5500  
[www.hpechu.on.ca](http://www.hpechu.on.ca)

Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation  
[http://www.cmhc.ca/en/co/maho/gemare/gemare\\_009.cfm](http://www.cmhc.ca/en/co/maho/gemare/gemare_009.cfm)

Friends of Stoco Lake  
[www.friendsofstocolake.ca](http://www.friendsofstocolake.ca)  
[info@friendsofstocolake.com](mailto:info@friendsofstocolake.com)

Quinte Conservation  
(private sewage inspection, drinking water,  
groundwater, shoreline naturalization advice)  
613 968 3434  
[www.quinteconservation.ca](http://www.quinteconservation.ca)

Ontario Rural Wastewater Center  
<http://www.uoquelph.ca/orwc/>

**Regular pumping and maintenance are excellent insurance toward the effectiveness and longevity of your septic system, and a happy septic system greatly improves the health of your family and environment!**



Printed on Envirocopy paper, made in Canada using 100% post-consumer recycled wood fiber, which makes this a tree-free paper.

February 2008